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a great new novel

by **J. HARVEY
HAGGARD**

NOV. 15c

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MYSTERY FROM THE STARS by **JOHN COLERIDGE**

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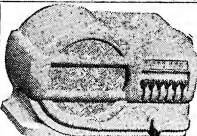
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WORLD REBORN

by J. HARVEY HAGGARD

A harmless comet passes. Harmless? But what of the after effects—what of the madness that comes upon Mankind, dooming him to a living death of insanity and degeneracy? Bart, Eora, and the Professor find themselves pitted against a primitive earth, suddenly peopled with naught but sub-human savages! Must they, three among the last humans, perish at the groping claws of Those Who Had Been Human?





It slid to the floor, impeding the progress of the others!

CHAPTER I

DOUBLE ESCAPE

SAM BELWINE decided that he wanted a drink of whiskey. He had rarely tasted the alcoholic drink on previous occasions, but he did feel that something out of the ordinary ought to be done in this peculiar instance. Even yet he wasn't certain that his senses were functioning perfectly. His re-

cent escape with his life had been altogether too exciting to be contemplated with complacency by Sam Belwine, to whom nothing more adventurous than irregular attacks of chronic hay fever and a few mild flirtations in the city parks had ever happened. He wanted to think it out.

The corner restaurant was practically deserted at this mid-afternoon hour, despite the straggling shopping crowd which passed its doors. A fat man snoozed peacefully near a back

table. The sun streaked in through a front window, attesting its summer warmth by the redness of the exposed bald head. A straw fan, held awkwardly in a propped hand, partially shaded the man's closed eyes. His sagging paunch was camouflaged by a twisted apron. When the dapper clerk approached Sam, looking with some surprise upon this smallish, bespectacled man, perched like an owl before an empty table, the aproned man awoke with a nod and made for the kitchen.

"Whiskey," said Sam Belwine, unconsciously assuming the air of nonchalance that characterizes the habitue, and thereby sliding himself up several notches in the estimation of the pompadoored clerk.

"Straight, sir?" asked the clerk politely.

"Straight," said Sam.

The clerk departed hastily, and not without reverence, to obtain the desired drink. Not every freckle-faced half-pint, he was thinking, came in to order his whiskey straight. He was accustomed to the class of people who regularly patronize such places where alcoholic drinks were imbibed, and Sam Belwine was certainly not of the class. The clerk meant to keep his eye open; he would remark about it to Jake the next time he came from the kitchen.

Sam Belwine sat at the table, took off his hat, withdrew a handkerchief, and wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. The broad plate-glass fronts of the restaurant formed right angles on the corner of the block. Beyond the glass he could see the street corner, an adjacent drug store, and a traffic signal, which had just swung the red signal to bear across the direction he would have to go to get out toward the observatory.

He, Sam Belwine, had been near death! It seemed incredible, when he considered the twenty-seven years of his humdrum life, awakening daily to grab a breakfast of bacon and eggs in the morning, rushing from the boarding house to the observatory, and on a few occasions, such as this, going downtown in the afternoon to "blow in" a show. He had a suspicion that Professor Cardithe, his employer, looked with disapproving eyes upon the hours spent at the cinema, which he considered a wasteful manner of employing one's time.

ALL this thought came in a flash. Sam ran over those last few moments. He had come from the theater, blinking into white sunlight. His eyes had funny little dots in them, swimming from side to side elusively, and they refused to focus comfortably upon the distance. He had frequently experienced the same phenomenon, which he knew was due to the muscular constriction about the lens of the eye, trained so long upon the invariable distance between the eye and the picture screen.

There had been a blare of drums, a discordant tattoo, and a motorcycle cop came roaring up the street on his vehicle, siren blowing. Behind him there came a motley parade of men, indiscriminately attired, some in dirty overalls, others in carpenter aprons, and still other various individuals toggled in the habitual clothing which denoted their trade—a workers' parade. He saw their banners, but it was hard to make out.

Tramp, tramp, tramp. The beat of feet in cadence. Clash! Blare! That discordant tintinnabulation had but one thing, a regular pounding time, marking the tread of hundreds of feet. Men were shouting. Passersby turned to observe, some halting mo-

tionless on the sidewalks. Someone screamed.

Sam didn't know at first that they were screaming at him. He was a bit dazed, and there was a lot of noise, as well as conversation. Suddenly from above, the body of a man catapulted in midair, appearing almost miraculously. He saw the flailing arms. Abruptly, the man turned in midair like a cat, and came down toward the ground with feet and arms extended. He fell almost across the sun, and that hurt Sam's eyes.

But the most puzzling bit of the attendant circumstance was what happened then to Sam. It happened internally. It was something Sam could not have explained. He might have written a very intelligent thesis upon the possible origin of Professor Cardithe's newly found comet, for instance, which was traveling in a parabolic curve and had probably originated in space. He might have speculated sagaciously upon the extraordinary "right-side-down" instinct of the man who had turned over in the air like a cat, provided he had considerable time for repose and capitulation. But he could never have explained what happened inside his own body, right at that moment.

He did not intend to move aside. He had no premonition of disaster. He could not have known that the heavy cornice of the two-story building was crumbling downward, loosened by the regular beating of cadenced feet upon the nearby paving, which had communicated its vibration to the structure of the building. Sam had no thought of jumping.

But he did jump, and he jumped like a champion. He had never believed himself capable of making a broad jump sidewise like that, and he could never have duplicated the feat. He could hardly remember the mo-

ment, in fact. There had been a blank space, and he was suddenly alighting between two parked cars beyond the curbing. He landed on two adjacent running-boards; there was a tortured ripping of steel, a crumbling groan from heavy cement blocks. He saw an unbelievable mass, detached from the rooftop, sliding downward. The cars shook and jounced when the weight drove through the windshield at his right.

The cornice of the roof had fallen. If he stayed right in his tracks, it would have been curtains for Sam Belwine, and as yet he had made so slight a mark in the world that he was sure of being forgotten overnight, in case of a sudden demise.

It was frightening. What scared him most was the realization that he had not escaped the crushing death of his own volition. There had been no warning. It wasn't like having jumped because of a premonition, or a sixth sense. It was like something snatched out of the incessant flow of existence, something immeasurably brief, but yet tangible.

Yes, damn it, whiskey! He remembered the subsequent confusion. A man had fallen two stories, from where he was repairing a ventilation louver in the upper cornice. He had fallen like a cat, and he wasn't hurt much, just bruised. There was a curious expression about the white countenance of the man, now staggering against the motor cop who had rushed to assistance; he seemed startled, almost bewildered, and not at all as one would suppose a tin-smith would be, just after the moment when he had displayed such cool ability for action.

Sam Belwine had slipped away. Someone commented nearby. "Good work, buddy! That was some jump!" But Sam hurried away.

YES sir, a good glass of whiskey! Lord, here he was, "cussing like a mule skinner." He'd never felt the impulse to use strong language before. He'd never had a glass of whiskey straight. In fact, beer made him choke and sputter. He judged all alcoholic drinks by beer and wine, which tasted like slop and acidulous water respectively to Sam, and he supposed whiskey straight was just so much more repulsive.

All these thoughts flashed almost instantaneously through Sam's brain, as he sat there, wiping the sweat from his feverish brow. It wasn't like thinking them over. Just impressions. The sun was hot and poorly shaded through the glass front. He could see the street and the line of parked cars. Why, the red stop-sign hadn't even switched off! And the clerk hadn't returned. It seemed longer, with all the excitement!

Quite without warning, the whine of a police car ripped through the air from somewhere down the street, piercing the buildings with a keen knife-edge of sound, gaining volume. A squat high-powered car charged out from the left, making toward the cars already halted before the stop sign. It was going at a terrific pace. A dark, wild-eyed visage hung over the wheel, looking back. The horn was blaring. A fugitive, evidently. He was glancing swiftly backward, lips moving as if cursing. Sam saw the scene through the window.

Sam Belwine rose with rapidity, but his body seemed rigid. He started to shout. His throat seemed petrified. The car swerved, yet no opening appeared to let it through. It swooped to the right, brakes whistling and tires screaming. With a terrific crash, it struck the curbing, spun sidewise, overturned and skidded into the "stop-and-go" sign,

snapping it off at its metal base. It all happened in the twinkling of an eye.

The clerk hadn't witnessed the scene, but he heard the crash, and several panes of plate glass window sagged in and were splintered. He set the tray with the whiskey down upon the table, his mouth lolling open. Ejaculating wildly, he ran toward the door, leaving the little man clinging limply to the table. The police car screamed up. Blue-coats swarmed out, yelling and holding back the gathering crowd. Someone, a pedestrian, had been injured. Sam Belwine himself, had he pursued his customary path, would have stood there, waiting for the signals to change.

He stared down at the tiny tumbler of colorless liquid. Whiskey! He'd never really desired it. A pungent aroma arose acridly to his nostrils. Jake came running from the kitchen, shouting, questioning. Sam Belwine very suddenly walked from the establishment. His face was very white and bloodless. He left the whiskey setting exactly where it was. He left his hat beside it. He did not pay for his drink, and the clerk was too occupied to notice the departure of his recent customer.

Sam tried not to look at the scene of tangled wreckage as he pushed his way past. He could see the crowd, and others were hurrying up, jabbering curiously. He didn't need to look back; his memory of that twisted car, his glimpse of tortured human bodies projecting awkwardly, the knowledge that he would have lain there, ground to a pulp beneath it all, had it not been for the inexplicable impulse to purchase a drink of whiskey, which he never had wanted, was enough to keep

that scene livid in his memory for a long while.

Sam Belwine was in no mood for cohesive thought. His universe was jarred from beneath him. He would hesitate hereafter to affirm that the mathematical equation of two and two makes four, or that two hemispheres correctly joined would create a perfect sphere—at least until he forgot this afternoon's occurrences. He had never really believed in coincidences; yet he realized that his life had been saved twice in a single day through the intervention of influences to which he would not have been normally susceptible, and it was a bit sickening, for he had never been more closely contacted with violent death in his life.

Sam Belwine staggered like a drunken man. His wan demeanor made him the target of curious eyes, once removed from the vicinity of the recent tragedy. He was similar to one in a dream. He stood at the corner, his eyes almost motionless. When he mounted the steps of a street-car, his limbs felt peculiarly weak and helpless.

Almost subconsciously Sam realized that he would be of little help to Professor Cardithe, even though it was a crucial moment in the photographing and tabulating of data concerning the new comet, but very lately under observation, which was scheduled to pass closer to earth than any other comet had ever gone.

CHAPTER II

HAPPY LANDING

A MAN might jump with unexpected vigor from beneath a falling cornice, or turn over in the air like a cat, or tumble like a pigeon for that matter,

but that wasn't especially what a newspaper reporter would call first-class news, providing the victim was of average importance and survived with a few minor bruises and no serious injuries. Any man would do the same thing, if he could. That was the abnormal thing about that day in June, 1954. The incredible aspect of Sam Belwine's escapade had occurred principally within his brain. The peculiar paradox of matters was that miracles were happening all around on that day, but the miracles were invisible. Some persons, more sensitive than others, may have noticed the change, but if there was any discussion relative to it, there have remained no records.

June 4th, 1954. Temperature moderately warm. An average quota of automobile accidents occurred early in the day. Seven people were killed within the city limits. That made 126 people dead from automobile accidents in the county, that year. They printed that information in the morning paper, alongside a similarly routine item which announced the discovery of a new comet—Cardithe's comet. It wasn't such a big comet, and it wasn't very luminous. It would come close to the earth, and a display of shooting stars was expected.

An elected governor getting ready for his inauguration on the morrow. How could he know that there would be no morrow? More deaths. Quite a few of fatal heart attacks. A more than usual number of sunstrokes, despite the moderate temperature.

Shooting stars, meteor radiants. And it brought back to mind Cardithe's comet.

Comets importing changes of time and
states
Brandish your crystal tresses to the sky....

That was from Shakespeare. Comets were omens of evil and pestilence,

in ancient times. But men were ignorant then. Perhaps they didn't realize it, and would have looked back upon the cave era, if they could have known of it, and regarded the primitive man as ignorant. The cave man must have considered the monkeys very ignorant. If the term "relativity" were not so overused, we might suggest its usage here. Mayhap even the monkey looks back upon inferior beasts with the comforting elation which accompanied the superiority complex. Comets and plagues. Crystal gazers and ballyhoosers. Cave men, and other objects of the past. If the comet had been expected to be intensely brilliant, they would have played up that angle. Those who could remember, and who weren't already in bed, or who weren't at the theater or other places of entertainment, might watch for the display, albeit for the most part in a lackadaisical manner.

Divorce. Headline!

Dentiline Princess divorces fourth husband. Expects to marry on the morrow. Dentiline, the prophylactic that kills teeth decay bacteria permanently on contact. A gold mine in disguise, edging out all contemporary dental preservators. A princess of fabulous wealth. Dentiline Princess may desert her native land for that of her next spouse. Dentiline Princess may desert her native land and go to Pluto, think many of the readers, but they read it just the same, and justify the efforts of an editor who knows what they want better than they do themselves. Dentiline Princess. Cardithe's comet. A comic section and classified ads between the two. Then there's the sports. And shopping news.

6:00 p. m. Communistic raids in New York. Telegraphic details of similar attacks upon private citizens

in Chicago, Washington and San Francisco. National Guards to the rescue. State troops. Confused forays.

7:00 o'clock. Oklahoma senator shot down in cold blood by policeman. Insanity the cause. 7:15. New York governor kills wife and daughter, then commits suicide.

When beggars die there are no comets
seen;
The heavens themselves blaze forth the
death of princes. . . .

More Shakespeare. Innumerable other cases of violent death, of cold-blooded murder. Men going mad, running the streets like dogs with rabies. Telegraphic sources of news a chaos. A reign of terror.

11:00 p. m., Pacific time. Short-wave radio ceases to function. 11:15, long-wave radio succumbs to static. Somewhere in Arizona a man, deaf and dumb, who had lain abed, partially paralyzed for fourteen years, raised up to his feet and shouted: "Praise God! I can see and hear again! I am whole!" One of his first sights was that of a vague luminosity in the clear skies of night, marking the passage of the comet. He sprang away from his bed, ran from the house, and fell dead upon the portal.

FURTHER west, a religious sect, numbering hundreds of persons, knelt on a hill-top, their twined hands raised heavenward in supplication. A frantic leader of their sect was praying. They expected the arrival of a new disciple of the Almighty, to resurrect the world, whom they called Mugumar. Several members collapsed in death before the mighty spectacle.

Out near Los Angeles, a trans-continental air liner swooped blindly amidst a thick fog. For some time it had circled aimlessly, while the

pilots sought beacons of the landing field. Back in the passenger compartment were hysterical human beings who refused to be quieted. The radio communication with ground stations had long before ceased. The radio operator, seated by the pilot in the control cabin, had gone berserk. A smart tap on the skull, through the services of a sizable end wrench, had ended the panic at the controls for the time being. Outside, the fog was white and ghostly in the headlight glare. The altitude instruments were useless, since their exact position bearings had been a matter for conjecture. It was possible that they were over the ocean now, due to their aimless circling. Quite without any sign of his intention, the pilot jerked over on the controls, the plane spun about in the banks of obscuring mist and roared on a new course.

"Where you going?" yelled the official mechanic aboard the air liner, staring at the pilot. There was no answer. The mechanic's face bleached out when he realized that the airplane was zooming down blindly into the impenetrable depths. He wanted to jerk forward, paused, realizing that a struggle over the controls would be to invite disaster. This was mad folly, at best. The pilot cut the motor, volplaned into the fog at a steep angle that made the mechanic's stomach turn.

He braced himself. Moments later he felt the padded wheels of the plane bounce against the turf. The craft rocked gently, rolled to a halt, and the mechanic's eyes widened in bewilderment. Vaguely through the ground mist he saw the gloomy outlines of the hangar. The familiar signal lights, even here, were hardly visible. They looked like dim eyes across the field.

"My God, you damn fool! You made it!" shouted the mechanic in consternation, as he saw gloomy figures hurrying across the hazy tarmac. "Flying blind through a fog. That was nothing less than a miracle!" He saw the pilot sit up very straight and blink his eyes, rubbing his hand over them. His hand was shaking.

The mechanic shouted boisterously. He was the first to leap from the door of the air liner. Calling to the approaching figures, he withdrew his gloves and opened his heavy coat. Out of the darkness, a metallic glint streaked toward him.

Reeling slowly, he slumped to the ground, a knife hugged deep in his tortured breast.

Miracles. Death. In the seventeenth century the poet Du Bartus had written:

... a Blazing Star
Threatens the World with Famine, Plague,
and War;
To Princes, death; to Kingdoms, many
crosses;
To all Estates, inevitable losses;
To Herdmen, Rot; to Ploughmen, hapless
seasons;
To Saylor, storms; to Cities, civil
Treasons.

Du Bartus lived in the seventeenth century, and that was the age of superstition. He called a comet "a Blazing Star," and that was the height of misinformation.

CHAPTER III

THE COMING OF THE RAYS

IT WAS a large room, and very quiet. The huge shaft of a telescope slanted up toward domed windows, partially shuttered. An electric glow hung over a low table. Leaning against it was a thin man who seemed almost exhausted. Jed Rickens had signed scientific docu-

ments in the past which had come to assume importance in the world of science, affixing his full name and title while doing it. He had sensed the full meaning and power of those abbreviated words then. He had felt exhilarated at times. But now he was just a man.

Jed Rickens was all alone. There was no one else here in the high house on the mountain. All others had gone, leaving but the wind, which whistled eerily around the dwarf pines by the mountain stream, conveying some of the icy touch of waters flowing down from melted snows. Tonight he heard their whisper. He heard the occasional sighing of dwarf pines in the darkness, and once the distant cry of a cougar had sounded, frightened and almost plaintive in tone. Even the wild beasts sensed something wrong, out there in their universe. But Jed was not afraid.

He had spoken many times into the phone that night, aware of the confusion and turmoil that had overtaken the world. There was a chance to warn some of these pitiable people who infested earth, so abruptly confronted with peril of which they were not yet aware. Perhaps some of them would live. He sighed, listened to the chuckling wires, and frowned. Waiting, he glanced up at the window giving into the dark heavens. The comet had gone. Occasional meteors flashed through the heavens, grim reminders of the ghostly messenger, departing outward into the immutable space which had witnessed its unknown origin. The comet was gone, but it had left invisible devastation in its wake.

He heard the wires talking now. How often had he repeated the words this night! How often had he thought of those few simple transformations

which had occurred high in the stratosphere, which were to doom mankind, even as perhaps they had once transpired to doom the mighty tyrannosaurus in his day? It was possible. Perhaps a comet had marked the extinction of the mighty prehistoric monsters, even as it was closing a page of history today.

First the ionized layers of the atmosphere had been affected, had suddenly lost their ionization. Some inexplicable quality had decelerated the vagrant electrons, swung them down to their rightful orbits, and the Heaviside layer, which reflected long radio waves, the Kennelly layer which reflected the short waves, were gone. Now the radio waves flashed forever into the infinitudes, nor could they return, to be picked up on other portions of the globe, as they had been in the past.

It wasn't the loss of radio. That could have been borne by a disgruntled populace. Jed Rickens knew of something far more horrible that had happened up there.

BUT of the dawn of time there had come a tiny film of vapor, a mere bubble of gaseous substance, which at sea-level pressure might have measured but one eighth of an inch in thickness; a gossamer blanket, but it had turned back that abundance of ultra-violet rays and infra-reds, which would have spelled finis to life upon earth. The ozone layer. But now it was gone.

He had repeated that so often to incredulous men that night. They just wouldn't believe. They fought against believing. His voice was shrill now, and a bit hoarse. The call of the mountain lion was repeated, coming over the alternating crescendo of the wind, and it gave him a sense of comfort.

Ozone. He was explaining it again, for the hundredth time. Caused by ultra-violet rays bombarding oxygen atoms at low temperature. At low temperature. Yes; three atoms of oxygen united to form a molecule of ozone. The ozone layer was thirty miles up, and it absorbed some of the infra-red rays too, as well as most of the ultra-violet coming from the sun's radiation through space. Ozone was unstable; even the heat absorbed from the infra-red disturbed its precarious balance. At thirty miles up, the temperature was warmer than just below, because of this heat absorption, and the ozone layer was thicker at the polar regions. Ozone could not exist in high temperatures. The friction generated by the passing of the comet had increased the temperature of the upper stratosphere. The impermanent ozone molecules disintegrated into component oxygen atoms. There was no ozone layer now.

There was no ozone layer!—no barrier now, to turn back those lethal ultra-violet rays. It had been vanishing yesterday, that thin stratospheric layer; Jed had measured its diminishing presence with the aid of an intricate spectroscopic mechanism.

Those ultra rays had been seeping down, even then, to some extent. Some individuals would be more susceptible, would be affected more readily than others. Jed had an idea that there were other wave vibrations, between the frequencies of the ultra-violet and the cosmic rays, which had been absorbed by the ozone layer. He based his suspicions on the information that had dribbled in during the previous day, of curious incidents, inexplicable by the presumption that ultra-violet rays alone had been re-

leased through the falling ozone barrier. Jed thought it possible that closely allied emanations, heretofore suspected but undefined, were penetrating down into the depths of the lower atmosphere, or troposphere. Those rays—he suspected—first affected the brain. These inter-viosmic emanations (between violet and cosmic) would place the body temporarily under the control of instinct. Sheer instinct. The body might involuntarily run amok, before death. That was what was causing these outbreaks among mankind. Instinct—the brain which is the body, which is the atoms, and is not of the mind, had taken control. Eventually, there would be insanity, or a coma of unconsciousness resembling it, before death.

Jed Rickens turned slowly, arose and rubbed his moist hands together. He straightened his bowed shoulders, stretching the cramped muscles, and walked to a sink in the corner of the room, where he rinsed his hands and face in cold water from the faucet, dried them, and stood rubbing his red-rimmed eyes. The night had seemed an eternity. On this day the sun would peep over the horizon, emitting a deadly bombardment which would wither all life before it. Jed did not need to be reminded that his observatory, high in the rarefied air, would be foremost in the way of that invisible rain of death. He had known of it, long before. Water vapor would cause a slight temporary protection in some of the lower areas. Jed was doing his duty as he saw it.

He paused before a grand piano, looming almost indiscernible amongst the shadows of the great room. Almost unconscious of movement, he slid across the polished stool. This was his one extravagance. He turned

back the cover that always concealed the polished oaken grain of the wood when not in use, pressed back the shield that hooded the long white row of keys. His fingers slid softly across a minor scale; deep mellow tones, always kept in perfect attunement, answered from the depths of the great instrument. But it was not what Jed sought; he let the cover slip back down over the piano and arose.

SUDDENLY he turned, flung open a window. The skies were lightening. The night was almost over. His tired face came to motionless tautness. He listened intently. Again he heard it, that low whine—the pad of feet. Now he saw the slinking form, as gray as early dawn; saw the scurrying legs, the unsteady gait of the great forest beast. It was the mountain lion. It ran twice across the clearing.

Instinct was driving it, thought Jed Rickens. No more would the savage lust for food drive that compact yellow mass of lean muscles upon his prey; no more would those sharp fangs rend or the curved claws tear his enemy to bits. An instinct was driving it toward protection.

It turned abruptly, loped over the clearing, and Jed Rickens backed across the floor. Dawn's light outlined the window. The great cat leaped into the opening, tensed. Its eyes gleamed like yellow tapers against the waning illumination of the electric glow. It paused, and beast stared across at man.

A long instant. Then Jed chuckled. Instinct was telling that animal to seek sanctuary. It could know nothing of the real danger, seeping out of space with the spreading flush of dawn; yet instinct drove it beneath the shelter of the observatory, which

would form a partial shield against the rays.

Jed Rickens spoke softly. The cougar snarled, seemed about to back out of the window. It turned its head sidewise, then leaped into the room. Perhaps the man was wrong. Perhaps the animal would revert to its primitive savagery, would hold true to form, would leap like a bolt of muscled lightning to the attack. The mountain lion did nothing of the kind. It did not seem aware of Jed's presence, after that first momentary consideration.

Jed felt the pressure of something vague grabbing at his nerve fibres. A grim smile played about his lips. He stared out through the window and saw the first ray of sunshine, bursting over the ridge in a sword-spray of light that pierced the gray-ing sky. Time seemed to halt. The wind ceased. Silence reigned; but during that silence, the leaves of the forest withered and turned brown perceptibly, as though before the charge of an invading plague. Time moved on. Involuntarily, man and beast alike had crouched and retreated to the far end of the room.

Intelligence had vanished from the baleful green orbs of their eyes, now glowing with phosphorescent color which seemed absorbed from some new glinting resource of the sunlight, nor did they appear aware that the exposed flesh was changing rapidly to a furious brown color. The tissue of the man's face and hands became enraged with that look of destroyed tissue which comes from excessive sunburn, except now the change was unbelievably rapid; an onlooker could almost have imagined the peeling off of the decadent cell layer as the dead tissue of a severe radium burn slips aside, leaving the raw gouged wound; his eyes, facing

full into the increasing radiation, turned slowly white, became sightless; the skin, now dark, began to split at the edges of his hair and at the nails upon his fingers.

The man and the cougar perished side by side.

IT WAS the Day of the Heat.

Trees and vegetation bent to the fury of the blast, shriveling to black dwarfed clumps that looked like char. Streams were evaporated and sucked up into the seething winds of hot air, coming as from the mouth of Hades. Long stretches of arid wastelands came into being as the planet rotated beneath the sun. The parched earth lay like a scorched sore that is poorly healed. But more terrible than those immersing heat rays were others, of smaller wave-length, searing down upon unprotected humanity. The terrible actinic rays of outer space, at last breaking through a gaseous limitation that had long held them back, suffused all earth. In the cities, men lay where the early solar rays found them, their bodies burned ebon and swollen, the skin surface broken and split, but dry because of the rapid evaporation that progressed constantly; it was a shambles; the intense heat aided rapid putrefaction. The torrid wind carried abominable stenches upward on currents of convection that sought the intenser temperatures of the altitudes.

It was the Day of Death.

CHAPTER IV

THREE ALONE

"IT'S been four days now, Bart. Do you suppose the world is devoid of all other life, out there?"

Eora Cardithe stood in the gloom before the high rectangular window, which was so murky in hue as to admit the passage of but little light. Set high in the thick basement walls, the oblong pane, dismal though it was, had been the one viewplate through which they dared look upon the outer world. The ordinary window glass would obstruct the ultraviolet rays, now infusing earth in full noxious radiation, but they were very careful. They had been prisoners, here in the lower basement, protected by thick walls through which the rays could not penetrate, and for four days they had been completely cut off from the world. Luckily, there was a refrigerating system in the basement, operating on an independent compression unit; with its services, they had managed to keep the heat down. Professor Cardithe, the only other human being who had survived, to their knowledge, was in some other part of the basement, and the two were alone. A kerosene lamp leered with a fitful red glare from a low wooden table. Several stray cobwebs hung from the dusty cement ceiling; a large spider, which had persisted despite Eora's spasmodic housecleaning efforts during those few days, had retreated to a dark upper corner, where he sulked before the intrusion of light and mankind into the dark domain of the basement.

Bart Kepler stood beside the girl, wearing his flying garments, as he had worn them four days and a night before, when his plane came zooming down through a heavy blanket of fog. He looked through the murky window upon a scene that was lifeless and foreboding, a drab view of a street that was always empty, and he could see a few houses, untenanted and silent. For four days noth-

ing had moved within that vista but the wind that tore at leaves and grass, leaving scurries of fine silt across the sidewalk. Scorched lawns, once kept meticulously trim, reflected the lack of human care.

Already the arid street had begun to take on the solemn aspect of a necropolis; the dwelling houses, shabby with peeling paint and heat-warped boards, might have been monuments to the dead of the past. It was almost incredible, thought Bart. Five days before, children had played on the lawns, tossing balls, pushing scooters and wagons. Men and women had walked by in irregular groups, talking, laughing, frowning or grumbling. That little view might have witnessed a cross-section of life, throbbing with the vitality of human beings. Cars would have rushed down the street, babies might have been born across the way; a man might have died within plain sight of the window. Now, there was nothing; nothing but a huddled form beneath a blackly gnarled bush, which Bart had been afraid to mention to Eora, for fear it might be identified as what he thought it was. He was filled with a sense of foreboding by the solitude that was never broken. The sepulchral movelessness of the tombs had crept out on the surface of the earth. How many had died—rather, how many had lived?—for it seemed unlikely that many could have survived the deadly radiation.

At last, his eyes strayed to the trim figure of the girl, limned against the oblong of light. He had thought her nose a trifle too long, at first glance, but now he observed the real symmetry of her features. Her yellow hair hung in fluffy curls; there was an insidious beauty for him in her petulant lips, her large sea-blue

eyes, shaded by heavy lashes. Her eyes, now that he thought of it, had a slight suggestion of Oriental slanting, but that was due to the outflung arch of carefully plucked eyebrows. Bart Kepler had never been entirely susceptible to excessive "make-up" in feminine beauty; Eora had captured, however, a strange harmony in her facial outlines. She was enchanting in an odd manner, without being beautiful.

AT LAST he spoke.

"Maybe it is all dead, Eora," he said. "Those deadly rays have been sweeping old Terra for four days. Of course, there may be others, protected by buildings like this, or by caves and mine shafts, but we would not have lived had your father not comprehended the danger and prepared for it. There's a chance that all is dead and barren, out there. Everything may be burned up in the terrific heat. Are you afraid, Eora?"

The girl turned impulsively. The look of concern vanished and she smiled, slipping her hand into his.

"Not with you, Bart," she said softly. The angular outlines of the basement contrasted sharply with her features; it was an unpleasant background for her eager mood; even her lithe body seemed out of harmony with the surroundings as she came close to him. She surrendered herself avidly, and for a few tense moments he crushed her savagely to him, deeply stirred. Her lips were soft beneath his brutal ones. Her flesh too, was soft, beneath his hard-muscled body. She disengaged herself with a movement.

"Cave man!" she whispered tauntingly. He clung to her hand.

"I'm sorry," he amended. "Maybe I am more brutal than others you are used to."

"Why, Bart!" she exclaimed. "Jealous?"

"Of course! I mean I don't know. Why should I be? But I know that I haven't been the first."

"Of course," she laughed. "But perhaps the most ferocious. Don't tell me I'm your first. Besides, I love it. It's a restful change from campus paramours."

"You're jesting," he protested, "and I was deeply in earnest. I've noticed your moody spells. I thought perhaps there was someone else. You seem to trust me. I don't want to be inquisitive, but you said that you're not afraid of all that lifelessness and horror beyond the walls of the house."

"And if there was," she said smiling, "could it matter now?"

"I think it's saying quite a bit," he said gravely, "on such short notice. Remember we've known each other for but four days."

"And a night," she corrected. "Anyway, I'm used to doing things on short notice. Maybe I'm just personally selfish, after all. If I felt that you were best fitted to protect me, then it's natural enough that such an immodest female would request you to take her home, especially after that wonderful performance of landing, despite the fog." They had discussed the incident before. Eora had been returning home from an eastern college, in response to an urgent telegram from her father. She had been one of the passengers of the air liner.

"Frankly, it's as much a mystery to me as it is to you how I ever piloted that ship down through the fog," he explained. "I just suddenly had the feeling that I knew where the hangar was, and headed for it. That was all. I asked your father about it; he was sure that I pos-

sessed some sense which is not normal, but he couldn't explain just what." He was a bit proud of it, this sudden ability that seemed so extraordinary, even if it were inexplicable.

"That was enough!" proclaimed Eora. "It saved us. And that's why I asked you to see me home that night from the hangar. That's why dad asked you to stay with us, for he knew death was about to overtake earth that night."

"It all hinges upon a dozen precarious little 'ifs,'" laughed Bart Kepler, wrinkling his nose, as was customary when he laughed. "Don't you think perhaps that there was some driving motive, which intended us to do all that, that night? Don't you think we might have been meant to do exactly that?"

Eora came exactly to shoulder height. Her hair brushed upon his breast. Her head was upturned. She looked ravishingly bewitching, but at his words she turned thoughtfully, and they stared out through the gloomy window. The limited view they had of the street was burned and scorched by excessive heat rays. The outer temperature must have been tremendous. Was the world lifeless, beyond the narrow panel? Would it some day revert to livable conditions, before their food provisions ran out? They were both thinking of the same thing, as it was natural that they should do. They would be alone, with the exception of Professor Cardithe, and they didn't consider him in the new universe they might face. In accordance with the moment and the mood, they were taking themselves very seriously.

"It sounds awfully silly," said Eora, searching for adequate words, "but I feel the same way. If it

hadn't been for all this, we would probably never have met. Perhaps there is a purpose behind it all. It's something like—well, like Adam and Eve, and it seems as though all this must have happened—just to place us together, except it's hard to feel—that important. We've known each other such a short time, yet I feel as though it has been ages. I never thought it was possible to fall in love like that before. It does seem as though there was something prearranged about it all, doesn't it?"

"In any case, darling, we can die, or live, together," said Bart. "I always felt that I would have crashed some day, would have gone to my death in flying. I'm all washed up now. It's you and I, sweetheart, for better or for worse." They sealed the compact with a kiss.

HOLLOW footsteps sounded on the cement flooring behind them. The kerosene lamp sent a shadow flickering high upon a flat, unadorned wall.

"Tut, tut!" chuckled a tolerant voice. They turned hurriedly to confront Professor Cardithe, who was munching a sandwich. He was a tall man, with sparse white hair.

"Why father, how unscientific!" ejaculated Eora. "Fried egg on toast!"

"Nevertheless very sustaining," commented Professor Cardithe. Bart sensed a distinct change in the scientist, who had been very preoccupied and grave up to this time, scarcely pausing, even to eat, in his vigilant watch over various recording instruments in a larger section of the basement, an old storeroom that had been transformed into a scientific laboratory. Now delicate instruments kept careful record of the metamorphosis which was transforming the

world. Particularly prominent among his meticulous tabulations were the graphs relating to spectrometric fluctuations of the ultra-violet zone. Now he seemed to have relaxed. The tired lines had retreated from his eyes. He was cheerful, in fact, despite his exhausted demeanor. "Please don't mind me," he continued, "as I know you won't. I've had a voracious appetite during our incarceration. One of my remote ancestors must have been akin to a herbivorous monster of the prehistoric period."

"And you come spying on us as if we were a pair of guinea pigs," remonstrated Eora jocularly.

"Even developments among guinea pigs have to be watched, from time to time," said Professor Cardithe, with twinkling eyes. "But I suppose that, even if you knew you were going to die the next minute, you would still be human."

"You're an old dear!" expostulated Eora sagely. "But something must have taken you away from your precious instruments."

"They call it women's intuition," responded the scientist. "It happens that you are right. I came to see if you two would like to join me for a stroll!"

"A stroll!" cried Eora and Bart simultaneously.

Professor Cardithe's smile had vanished. "We'll have to get out and find what's happened, some time or other."

Eora cast a hopeful glance toward the window. "Then the rays are—" she began eagerly.

"The rays are still there in full force," declared Professor Cardithe. "There is a means, however, by which we may walk among them. That is by wearing special sheathing armor which I have prepared. If you will come with me, I will explain."

They followed breathlessly as he led them down the corridor runway, past several barrels of refuse and some bits of used furniture. Turning into a spacious chamber, well lighted by two coal-oil lamps, the scientist indicated three bulky helmets which had quite obviously been improvised from large bell jars. The rest of the "armors" consisted of thick canvas coverall garments, such as are commonly used by men who work in rainy weather, together with heavy leather work gloves. The material had been treated with a flexible vitreous coating.

"As far as the ultra-violet rays are concerned," explained the scientist, "we will have nothing to fear, with these on. I've been testing the material, and I'm confident it excludes them." He pointed to a small arrangement which included a rack and several clamps, holding a rectangular strip of the prepared cloth, an electric bulb such as had been frequently used in the past for ultra-violet treatment, and a small spectroscope mounted on a tripod.

"I was lucky to find several batteries down here with which the illuminate the bulb," he explained. "It radiates the true ultra-violet of the solar rays, allowing radiation in the erythema producing region, yet above the conjunctivitis region, so they can be endured with the naked eye for short periods without harmful effects. I find, however, that the cloth is now impervious to the shorter and dangerous waves of light."

Bart Kepler picked up one of the helmets. It looked as though it would be exceedingly clumsy, and he said so.

"Don't you think we're taking a chance if we go out in this get-up?" he queried, glancing in Eora's direc-

tion. If he had wished to spare the girl, her father had no intention of doing so.

"We cannot live here forever," stated Professor Cardithe bluntly. "There's no use in dodging facts. Our food supply will diminish within a few days. We've had a break in having a storage of canned fruits here, intended for the winter months, and as yet the city water supply has not ceased. But we don't know when it will. It looks to me like it will be necessary, sooner or later."

"I agree with dad," interposed Eora. "And in case you're thinking of leaving me behind, in justice to my membership of the exalted weaker sex, please get that off your mind. I won't stay behind! That would be harder to take than accompanying you."

CHAPTER V

CITY OF DECAY

PROFESSOR CARDITHE looked across at Bart Kepler, who frowned hesitantly, then shrugged. Preparation for their excursion was begun immediately. The coverall garments proved to have plenty in length and girth, which was fortunate, since the legs had to be bound completely around their shoes. Care had to be taken that no single aperture was left whereby the diffused rays might enter. The bell jars were strapped tightly about their heads, with a hood of several thicknesses of the vitreous cloth draped from its inverted lip to the waist of the wearer. Through its darkly muffled folds, air could enter for breathing. Bart tried talking, but found his voice low and subdued.

They were ready. How grotesque they appeared! Their heads were

plainly visible through their transparent hoods, but the rest of their bodies were muffled in the clinging folds of the glistening ultra-violet armor. Now Professor Cardithe was clearing away the curtains from a door that had not been opened for days. The key grated under pressure from his gloved fingers. The bolt slipped aside, the door swung in; sunlight flooded the interior down a ramplike flight of steps, ascending to the ground level. With grim irony, the scientist turned aside, motioning for the other to precede him. Bart realized with momentary fear that an invisible death was saturated within the glow of outer light. He saw Eora's eyes wavering; that helped to steady him.

"Here's where I take off," he said thickly through the protecting folds, and strode forward.

"Happy landings, airman!" called Eora, and as he mounted the steps she came right behind. The sun's rays were hot and there was an intensity that hurt the eyes. Bart blinked and shaded his brow by tilting his hand above his head. Now he looked around. How silent everything was—and how still!

Professor Cardithe and Eora were beside him now, standing while they peered curiously. Cardithe shouted something in a muffled tone, indicating a direction down the street. Bart nodded and walked by the girl's side. He was suddenly sick to the core. His eyes had wandered past the dirt-strewn walks, over the dead lawns, to the crumpled shape beneath the char of a tree. His eyes had discerned the swollen, blackened features of that which had once been a man. It was horrible.

He might as well have saved his compassion for Eora. Before they had gone a dozen steps, new horrors

came to view. He saw several corpses, lying promiscuously along the street. The flesh had enlarged, split in ugly, dry crevices. That which had been little more than a baby lay beneath an ornate entrance to one of the wealthy residential homes; a few feet from it lay a woman. A suffocating stench, reeking with a sickly, heady odor, came to their nostrils. The nasal repugnance seemed to be conveyed to the other four senses.

BART gritted his teeth as each hellish detail of the scene went home. He watched Eora. For a moment she swayed; he thought she might faint and he drew closer, but she averted her eyes determinedly. After that, they tried not to look at the cadavers. Professor Cardithe went about his investigation systematically. They searched through several of the neighboring houses from cellar to roof. In each case, the results were the same. The inmates, not knowing that the danger came from the sun's light, had died from exposure, either in the direct rays or in the diffusion of light, entering through doors and open windows. In many cases, the wretched victims, having suffered the intense heat as long as it seemed possible, had wrenched open windows, hoping for fresh air, but in actuality welcomed the extinction that came on the wings of luminosity.

Leaving the immediate vicinity, they trudged toward the business section of the town. Over the drab roof-tops they could see the slender spire of the city hall, rising in the distance to pierce the skyline. Once those many stories had housed the administrative control of one of the largest metropolises in existence. Now it stood, lonely and bleak, and as the wind swept dirt and refuse in

a thick drift across the entrance steps, it resembled a monolith, still standing after the civilization which had created it had crumbled into decadence. Bart had the impulse to flee away down the street as though the place were accursed, nor to stop running. He knew abruptly that his face was exuding sweat from every pore. He lifted his gloved hand to wipe his brow, only to remember the obstruction afforded by his helmet. Hot gusts of air were sweeping into his lungs.

Professor Cardithe stopped before a corner building with a folding door front. He waved his arms toward the broken plate glass, indicating that they were to attempt to make an entrance. Bart pushed his hand past the broken glass, found the catch, and shoved the door back. They strode inside.

It was a grocery store. Three men lay dead among the vegetable stands, whose dried wares looked wholly unpalatable. Cardithe motioned toward the shelves. Someone or something had been there before them, tearing down the rows of canned foods. Many tins lay in heaps on the floor. In the far shadows of the store they drew together, daring to disturb their muffled hoods enough to allow the exchange of conversation.

"We'll have to take food back with us," declared Professor Cardithe. That was entirely evident. Bart piled the cans on the floor. Eora found boxes and packed the tins in. There was a variety of canned vegetables, tomatoes, peas, beans and carrots; the fruits included apples, pears, plums, grapefruit and pineapples, as well as various berries. There was not much choice; anything that was edible would suffice; they could come back later for more. They pushed the filled boxes near the entrance, decid-

ing to explore further into the main heart of town in the hope of finding other live humans. The boxes could be picked up on the way back.

Bart had become accustomed to the dead now. They were everywhere, piled in grotesque attitudes. Automobiles, stalled along the streets, with lifeless beings slumped before their wheels, told of death which had taken its toll without mercy. Occasionally they discovered bodies that bore signs of mutilation. Some of the poor victims had succumbed before others. In their dying madness, those last to die must have committed insane depredations. The window before a jewelry store was smashed. Part of the gems on display were apparently missing. An automobile had smashed through a store front. They passed a street car, halted in a thoroughfare of the dead.

Main Street—inexpensive show fronts, gaudy even yet with their pictured attractions; pictures of girls scantily clad. Legs which were now burned black! The thought was revolting. Bart Kepler felt that something was watching them. His eyes searched the roof line. Something moved, then was gone.

He told Cardithe of the incident. They called aloud, but received no response.

"Maybe it's nerves," said Bart with a jerky laugh. "I'm not sure. I've had a curious feeling that something has been watching us at various times."

"You'd hardly expect anything living to be up on the rooftop," said Professor Cardithe, "in the direct rays of sunlight."

BART said nothing; he was becoming more and more alarmed with each passing moment. He recalled the mysterious sense of orien-

tation which had enabled him to pilot the plane through the obscuring fogs, and compared this bizarre sensation with it. Although he could catch no glimpse of motion, either by spinning suddenly to scan the canyons formed by the silent streets, or by assiduous scrutiny of each edifice in detail, nevertheless, he was sure that eyes were focused upon them, watching their every move. He decided to insist that they return immediately, but as he hesitated, the scientist paused and gestured up a flight of ascending steps, paralleling a huge structure. It was the Hill Street station of the Pacific Electric.

Here they abandoned their search. Clerks had died behind their desks. Frantic men and women, awaiting transportation, had perished. Here, as in the streets, signs of depredations and mutilation appeared upon the blackened bodies. Here again they found opportunity for speech.

"It's horrible!" cried Eora. "I think we might just as well go back."

Bart's words were incoherent. It was too ineffable. A queer thought flashed through his mind. Was this life real after all, or was it a thing of the brain? What was reality? But after all, it wasn't a new thought and therefore not queer—but odd. His will-power seemed lethargic.

"It is as bad as I thought," admitted Professor Cardithe, sighting the sun, which was descending in the west, although the glare seemed not to diminish. "What it amounts to is this. The friction from the comet, which is probably gaseous as a whole, but certainly carries a train of meteoritic bodies in tow, has disrupted the ozone layer of the stratosphere by adding heat. Now that the comet's gone, we can expect this added heat to dwindle. Ozone is normally created by ultra-violet radia-

tion in areas of low temperature. A static electric discharge generally unites oxygen in such a way as to create a bit of ozone, familiar in the laboratory by its pungent smell."

"Will the earth be livable again?" asked Bart.

"When the upper areas again reach a low temperature, the ozone belt will be automatically recreated, and once more the deadly emanations will be shut off from earth," explained the other. "Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be what is happening. The heat rays, now pelting the planet in full force, are causing such an intense heat by the reflected radiation into the troposphere as to maintain the higher areas persistently above their normal temperature. Eventually, I think, the heat will go down, and the ozone belt will be reformed. As you see, human life, at best, was always on a very precarious basis. It is really a miracle that it ever developed as far as it did. The balance of the elements has been disrupted slightly, and this is the consequence to mankind. Civilization has approached a parlous pass; for me to predict its outcome would be too much to presume. The development of this planet has passed through various critical stages before. As a world, it still exists, but it may be that its age, as related to man, is passed into oblivion."

Bart's hand suddenly closed over the other's elbow.

"Be quiet!" he whispered harshly. "There's something coming up the subway well!" An unnamable thrill coursed their spines, for there was nothing visible, as yet. Nor could Bart hear footfalls. Yet he knew, just as he had known where the hangar was within the fog, that something was creeping up the steps.

They paused, frozen with appre-

hensive fear. Bart backed them toward the outer doorway. Then the shadows shifted; dark figures, naked and almost unhuman, groped up the steps, feeling of the wall-railing for guidance.

"Good God!" ejaculated Professor Cardithe. "They're humans! They are!—but burnt almost black."

"Then others have survived!" exclaimed Eora. "The poor souls!"

Bart could have cursed. Their conversation had been unguarded. Surprise had overcome natural caution.

"Those are devils!" he snorted furiously, as the others paused in their retreat. "Can't you see that no human being could endure what they have, and still retain sanity?"

AT THIS juncture, the foremost figure, a monstrous ebon-fleshed thing, peered around attentively. His eyes were huge, swollen, and entirely white. A black slit of a mouth opened gibberishly. It had evidently heard their conversation, for it tilted back its monstrous shaggy head, and emitted a mocking laugh that rung from one end of the edifice to the other.

"Back!" shouted Bart. "It's mad!" Just then the diabolical thing screamed again and lurched forward, diving in their direction. It was quite apparent that it was blind, for it staggered into a railing, clutched out and barely saved itself from falling into the well of the descent. Behind it came others, with distended sightless eyeballs rolling, their fingers groping, heads cocked sidewise as if depending on hearing alone for guidance.

Eora screamed, long and loud. Her panic-stricken feminine wail rang even beyond the glassite hood, guiding the horde of semi-humans in their fumbling search.

"They're hunting food!" shouted Bart.

"Yes, that would be their instinctive desire," asserted Professor Cardithe. "I agree with you. They're quite mad!" He flung his arm about the swaying body of his daughter. "We'll have to escape." He turned, made his way awkwardly toward the door, half supporting Eora. Bart turned to follow. He wanted to leap past the two figures of his erstwhile companions, to jump down the flight of steps to the ground beyond, but he conquered the impulse and turned.

Planting his feet firmly, he met the foremost monster with a very forceful right to the jaw. A gurgling cry came from the demon's throat. It slid to the floor, impeding the progress of the others who came charging insanely behind. A wholesale melee followed, in which the one who fell was the key. Startled at this new turn of affairs, Bart crouched back against the wall, keeping perfectly silent, for he realized that they were blind. As he had hoped, they gave him no further heed, but proceeded to arrange themselves from the jumble as best they might.

It took the greatest effort of will to hold himself rigid. Warmth from his exertion was inflaming the hotly coursing veins in his body. He clenched his moist-damp hands in their gloves. His eyes became hot. Now his stomach felt weak.

He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, as Eora had screamed. Not all of those black naked figures were arising from the maze of bodies, which had resembled a "nigger pile" such as he had participated in as a boyhood game. The one at the bottom, whose cheek had been ripped by Bart's blow, had not arisen. Greedy teeth were inserted in the

wound. Black tongues, now painted red, were close. Others, held motionless by the weight of bodies, suffered from the ogreish hunger attack. Groans and yells rent the air.

Bart's knees started to slump, but he reeled forward, guiding his wobbling limbs for the outer door. He gripped the railing beyond the threshold, then half slid, half fell down the steps.

Professor Cardithe was at the bottom, with Eora. Bart knew they mustn't talk or make a noise to attract the unwholesome monsters above. He indicated silence and they staggered as rapidly as possible down the street, past the immobile black chars which had once been human beings, past broken windows and sagging walls. The sun was setting now, and its light was saffron against the illuminated portions of the buildings. In the long black shadows which extended across the canyon walls, blacker shadows crept forth, and misshapen hands groped. Nostrils flared. Sightless eyes peered into nothingness; for to them those man-made streets were a wilderness. Here and there squatted grim creatures, as the Neanderthal man squatted long before, in the far gone past, and even as the primordial man, these hunted alone, and would growl and snarl warnings at the approach or passage of others such as itself. At times there must have been hideous conflicts, as evidenced by the torn and mangled creatures lying along the way; even the victor might have fallen prey to others who smelled the hot fresh scent of life fluid spurting from the newly made wounds. Night was coming on; Bart sensed that it was during the black nocturnal hours, when the earth was shut off from the ultra-violet emanations, that the blind half-humans came to seek sa-

tiation of their natural desire for sustenance. During the day, they quite probably slept under houses and in such deeply shaded places as cellars. Maddened as these beings must be, it was quite understandable that they could not comprehend the canned tins in the grocery stores.

The streets were no place for them. They must get back to the laboratory.

NO CONCERTED pursuit was instigated from the Hill Street station; Bart felt that logic and reasoning were vanished forever from the half-human things whose screams followed them down the street; what further horrors were participated in above the mouth of the subway well, where many of these half-humans had retreated, were hidden from knowledge by the bleak walls of the upper building, as sunset shadows flickered along rooftops, sending a tongue of flame high across the sky. As long as light prevailed, these blasted remnants of living flesh would not pass freely from the outer portal.

At times, Eora was a dead weight in her father's arms. Bart helped in supporting her, but presently she was able to walk alone. Despite their natural hysteria, they managed to stop by the ravished grocery store for their boxes of tinned foods. In their fright, they carried over-heavy loads, bending beneath the bulky weight. Occasionally, they saw black bodies moving among the shadows and gloomy recesses, but invariably, the would-be attacker stopped when the light of the sun fell upon his unprotected body, and once more retreated into shadows.

Once in the laboratory basement, Eora dropped her load and staggered toward a chair. Bart and Professor

Cardithe lost no time in closing the outer door, barricading it against possible invasion of the living monstrosities as well as against penetration by the fatal rays, which would return in full strength on the morrow. Bart wrenched his armor from his head, took a deep breath of air. As Professor Cardithe lighted a lamp with a match, Bart started forward; his eye had alighted upon Eora, who had slumped to the floor in a faint. It had been more than her overstrained nerves could bear.

Kneeling swiftly, he stripped away the cumbersome armor; a wild fear assailed him that she might be dead, but her bosom was rising and falling in slow respiration.

"She's fainted," he announced inanely, as Cardithe set the lamp on a table.

"No wonder!" muttered Cardithe. "Carry her to a cot. I've wondered about my sanity in those last few moments. If it weren't for you, Bart, and your infernally homely face, I'd not believe in its reality."

Bart Kepler cursed the other long and fluently as they stretched the girl on the cot and worked over her; it helped relieve his tremulous nerves. It vented something pent-up. He had cursed his mechanic like this, once when their plane had crashed in a dark field, and their mission had been important. The mechanic had borne it stolidly, even as the scientist was doing. Despite all they could do, the girl yet lay in a coma, although her breathing was heavier.

It was during those long, unbearable hours, stretching into the night, as they awaited frantically by her side, that Bart's mental machinery knew the deepest despair. Eora had developed a fever, and her face was flushed. The aviator had cursed her father intermittently, but occasion-

ally his words were wildly coherent.

"Maybe she'll be better if she dies!" he had exclaimed. "God knows it would be merciful. Perhaps it would spare her from—"

"Be quiet!" ordered Cardithe sternly. "She's moving. I think she's regaining consciousness."

The girl's heavy lashes moved and she rolled her head. Then she opened her eyes. She saw Bart. A greenish glint came into her eyes. Then she smiled, reached out to grasp his hand.

"I'm so glad, darling, to see you," she said. "I've been so far away. It seems like I might have been across worlds, across unfathomable abysses and universes, from you. Please stay close."

Professor Cardithe breathed easier. He stood up, relaxed, and brought a bowl of soup to the girl's side. When she saw the broth, she dropped Bart's hand, seized the container, and drank avidly, slopping the steaming liquid from the corners of her mouth.

A HURT expression came into Cardithe's eyes as he watched her. Fear narrowed them, widening again as astonishment gained the upper hand. Glancing enigmatically at the aviator, he again returned to the table, bringing back a plate of pears. These too, the girl seized, eating them voraciously, seizing them with her fingers, stuffing them into her hunger-tortured mouth. When she had finished the fruit, she looked for more, and seemed to realize their bewilderment.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "But I was famished! I feel better already; honest I do." She looked better. Her fever was gone; soon she dropped off to sleep. Professor Cardithe was very grave and stern

as he turned to Bart. Each of them, without verbal conversation, was remembering the ghastly manner in which the half-humans had gorged themselves.

Cardithe picked up the slack ultra-violet armor, slumped beside the chair. His awkward hand knocked the chair over with a clatter; he turned attentively, but the girl merely stirred in her sleep and did not awaken. Against the dark angular crannies of the cement basement his features were vividly contrasted. Lines gathered, were visible in the weak glow of the lamp, and he shifted his glance towards Bart, who was watching him fearfully.

"Those rays," said Cardithe slowly. "Do you suppose some of them went through, even this. . . ." That night they procured heavy sheetings of lead and fastened them on the walls and ceiling of the room about the girl.

Next day, Eora awakened with no signs of her first hunger. She appeared to be entirely normal. The healthful flush returned to her cheeks. She did not seem to remember the episode of the midnight hours, and they did not speak of it.

Three days passed. The fuel for their lamps was running low. Much of their time was spent in darkness, crouched before the single window, through which they were certain that ultra-violet rays could not pass. Their food would last for several weeks, providing it were used carefully. Bart shuddered to think of venturing forth in another excursion for food, but he knew they would have to do it. They saw no signs of life beyond their rectangular viewing place.

On the fourth day a half-human came into view, staggering across the bleak vista of dead lawns and

drifted silt. He squatted for a long time beneath the tree where the body lay. He came at the twilight of dawn; when the place beneath the tree was bare, he went away, but at dusk he returned.

THEY were sure that he prowled around, just outside the window, all that night. Once he rustled against it, tapped it with his knuckles, and they glimpsed his demoniac countenance. Bart demanded that they don the ultra-violet armor and go in search of weapons, for they had none. Professor Cardithe agreed, but pointed out that it would be wiser to wait for the morrow.

On the morrow, a second half-human appeared. He was smaller than the other, but when they became aware of each other, fell into deadly combat. At the end of a gruesome battle, the larger of them vanquished the other and carried the loser away with him. Their nerves were becoming shredbare. That day at noon they again went out of the laboratory basement in their armors; after searching two neighboring houses, they discovered one pistol, a .32 caliber of heavy bluish metal, and a twelve-gauge shotgun, with ammunition for both. It was not much of an arsenal, but they decided it would have to do. The sky was overcast. The parched earth had given heavily of its moisture to the heat-laden atmosphere. This partial obscuring of the sun's rays by water vapor would obstruct and absorb some of the ultra-violet rays. It would probably allow the half-humans to venture abroad into the daylight; later they glimpsed several of them fleetingly through the window, verifying the supposition. That night Eora fell ill, her sickness being characterized by periods of lethargic semi-conscious-

ness. With the new day, she regained her appetite and ate heartily. They decided that, under no condition within their physical powers, should she venture out into the ultra-violet again, armor or no armor. They made the resolution with some inward misgivings as they perceived the half-humans loitering near, presumably attracted by the scent of living flesh which was exuded inexorably from the laboratory basement. Professor Cardithe credited the half-lumans with some sort of basic instinct, forming a motivation incentive much like that of lowlier creatures, for he did not feel that intelligence, recognizable as such, could remain under the existing circumstances. Self-survival would be the main driving power of those blind, blackened creatures, shorn of the last rudiment of civilization, and under this distinction, hunger and thirst would form the principal urges within their beings.

The fuel for their lamps was all gone, except for a small tin which was kept for emergency. Each day Cardithe managed to allow several stray beams of the outer sunlight to penetrate through a crack he had bored in the wall. The light was captured in the spectroscopic apparatus, and there photographed. He had thought it possible that the ozone layer would gradually reform in the stratosphere, and the ultra-violet rays would cease to bombard the earth, but their intensity did not decrease.

Several days after they had obtained the weapons, Bart came upon Cardithe at dawn. He had been at Eora's bedside; the girl had tossed and tumbled during the night, often uttering unintelligible phrases, but had quieted toward the coming of morning. The light was obscure from

without, coming as it did through the single window, diffuse even on the exterior because of the low-hanging clouds, but there was no question as to the character of the object the scientist held in his hand. The pistol. He was looking at it curiously, as though drawn to it with hypnotic fascination; his long untapered fingers caressed the smug barrel.

Eora was lying on a cot in another portion of the basement, unaware of what was transpiring. Bart stood, watching Cardithe across the intervening distance. The scientist looked up, his tired lips cracking into a smile. He laid the wapon upon the sill.

"Don't worry," he said. "I will never—choose that way—although I will admit it has its attraction. I have often wondered about that other life, following this worldly one, and what it consisted of. Whatever it is, there is not much doubt but that it might be preferable to this."

Bart Kepler shrugged and turned aside. He too had looked upon the weapon with much of the same thoughts.

CHAPTER VI

MUGUMAR IS COMING

EDWAR KILTERBERRY had read about the predicted coming of the comet, with its attendant meteoric shower, as he munched his minced ham and pickle sandwich for noonday "dinner." Where he was he could see the picks and shovels, sticking nakedly up in deserted piles of raw fresh dirt which lay about the bottom of the big ditch under excavation for the branch aqueduct. His loose mouth leered and allowed a crumb to escape unnoticed to the dirt bank upon which he sat,

and a black ant came down from the tree that furnished partial shade during the noonday hour, investigating the particular scenty fragment dropped by the man-being.

Amelio, the Italian-Portuguese, had finished his garlic-saturated dinner with much gusto; after wiping his mustache, he lay down several feet from Edwar Kilterberry, flat on his back, flattening his tired muscles against the ground in complete relaxation, with his hat pushed over his face to shade away the hot sun; thus he snatched a bit of rest before the signal came at 1:00 to resume work. A dozen yards along the embankment was another tree with a bit of under-nourished devilgrass near its roots, forming a slightly more inviting seating for the mid-day meal, and at the time it harbored several of the younger men, intermingled with a few white-haired elders, who were engaging in what, upon first appearance, seemed an informal communistic conversation. Some of the men hadn't finished eating yet, but were so interested in why the president wasn't doing what he ought to, or what caused the general "mix-up of the country" that they would interject syllables and phrases into the conversation which were mushed and garbled through mouthfuls of ripe tomato, sandwiches, or double handfuls of tortillas and frijoles, brought separate and prepared lovingly by wrapping the empty tortilla—pasteboard-thin pancake—into the palm of the hand, and adding the beans, pickles, weiners and peppers according to the personal taste; the final touch was given by a simple closing of the hand. As the talk waxed enthusiastic, much emphatic headwagging was indulged in; various individuals spoke when something they considered para-

mount entered their minds, with a result that more often than not more than one person was speaking at the same time, until the general volume of words and the vehemence with which they were uttered became the main points of speech.

"Cheeker" Quany, whose specialty was being amusing with questionable jokes and sallies, had long since abandoned an attempt at humor which did not seem to "go over," and was doing fairly well in the political discussion by referring luridly to various men of such importance as to make the more vulgar comparisons ludicrous but emphatic. He was wondering "why in the hell" the ignorant people didn't get together and do something. Someone else said, "Krist, we ain't got a chance! How we gonna nominate someone for gov'ner? We vote for the ones they stick up." They knew nothing of the more epochal circumstance now unfolding within the set countenance of the man, not a dozen yards down the embankment, who was generally considered as a "bit loose on his nut."

Edwar Kilterberry heard nothing of the conversation of that day. It was so common as to be disregarded. He would have been enraged had his wife forgotten to tuck the folded newspaper above the thermos bottle of coffee in his lunch tin, and on top, when folded a certain way, was the article about the comet. No one can account for the train of thoughts which occasionally come uppermost in the mind, originating in dim recesses of memory which are partially forgotten. Edwar had seen "shooting stars," and had often tried to shout "Money, money, money!" before they died away. He was not particularly comprehensive of the fact that shooting stars were considered ominous, but he had, in some of his chronic

religious attacks, heard mention to something similar.

His head lolled, his eyes got glassy, and he sat, his body slumping over from the bole of the tree, with his hair awry and his hands loose on his dinner pail. Jelly ran out of a tilted jar on his pants leg, but he didn't notice. Amelio didn't pay particular attention, but later he admitted that he had rolled once or twice and shifted his hat over his eyes when the ants crawled over him; during such an operation he glimpsed Edwar, who looked as if in a "spell or a taking"; after saying this, Amelio crossed himself.

BE THAT as it may, when the boss got to his feet, picking his teeth with a toothpick, Amelio was the first to notice as usual; he sprang to his feet, moving toward the shovels like a trained hound. The signal to work came, and still Edwar did not move. He had not heard a sound. He was dead to the world. The flat end of a spade descended with a smart smack athwart his posterior, being wielded by a practical joker, and he came out of the daze with a glassy-eyed start. He didn't look natural—so the workers said later—and paid no more attention to the foreman "nor if he wasn't standing there." Just got up, slid down into the ditch, leaving his lunch pail sprawling in a heap, and picked up his shovel. Ten minutes later, after acting like a punch-drunk "Cherokee" and becoming a disapproving focus for the foreman's eyes, he dropped the shovel and suddenly said:

"Boys, I done seen a miracle! I see it all in a dream. I seed a prophecy. The stars will fall from the heavens, and a blazing fire will descend on the world! It's going to be burnt

up. And Mugumar will come."

Walking awkwardly, he climbed from the ditch and staggered over the edge, vanishing from sight down the road. The foreman cursed him for a damned "lunatic" and swore it was his last day there. Yet such occasions seldom fail to leave a definite impression of evil that clings in the memory with aggravating tenacity. Conversation lulled and the men were very thoughtful. One of them recalled the coming of the comet, and there was a short laugh. But the laugh died out as recollection of Edwar's uncustomary appearance lingered.

That night at the church services, Edwar testified. He hadn't been to church for over three years, and he walked up the aisle during the sermon, halting the preacher; with high-flung hands, he told of his vision. His appearance was so uncanny, with his torn overalls and dirt-splotched face, that some of the members arose, shrieking in tongues of unintelligible syllabication, while a victim of apoplectic seizures fell to the floor in a fit, with his mouth frothing.

The cycles relating to periods of intense religious fervor are unpredictable and incapable of analysis, but interrelated inextricably with periods of tribulation and fear; perhaps even then, the incorporeal hands of the great change were making alterations within the sensitive natures, disturbing delicate balances which needed but the slightest irritation; the fact merely remains that overnight, the membership was filled with the most terrifying presentiment and dread for the approaching comet. The membership grew with their mounting fears; the church revenue was doubled, tripled, then multiplied many times. After a few short nights

of hectic testimony, hundreds of people were awaiting the coming of the new prophet, Mugumar, whom Edwar had glimpsed as coming in a train of shooting stars and in a blaze of fire which would sweep the surface of the earth.

June 4, 1954. Nearing midnight. A religious sect, numbering hundreds of persons, knelt on a hill-top, their twined hands raised heavenward in supplication. Edwar was chanting, praying. Several members collapsed in death before the mighty spectacle. Then came the rain of meteors, flashing across the dark sky in the comet's wake. That marked the exodus.

As the people of Noah marched into the ark before the flood, so did Edwar Kilterberry's clan march down to the mouth of the great aperture below the hill, to void the purging of the planet by fire. Beyond the aperture were giant caverns, catacombing into the earth, which Edwar Kilterberry and his followers thought were natural caves. Edwar Kilterberry had visited the caves as a boy, while hunting rabbits and doves. Now he believed, from his own repeated assertions, that the caverns had been placed there by Providence. The people of Edwar Kilterberry took cows and goats with them. Previously, they had installed hay and feed in the rearmost caverns. Some of the cattle would be killed and butchered for meat. There was also a great deal of fruit in glass jars, and ragged bundles of bedding. As they circled in a long file about the amphitheater which led down to the jagged mouth of the cave, carrying gasoline torches to light the perilous descent, they chanted a song in unison which rang against the hillside and re-echoed up into the spectacle of meteors chasing across the upper heavens. The general tune

was patterned close to an old hymn, although they were not cognizant of the fact, for what they sang was wordless, a conglomerate blending of discordant voices upon the still air of a world they were leaving to its desecration. Now the torches flickered and danced in the outflung ghostly spiral; the rhapsody roared up to the meteorite-sprinkled firmament, swelling and throbbing, now with exultation, now with passionate fear, again surging from crescendo to a low rumble, fairly atremble with deepest woe; the unsteady roar was like the beating of surf upon a craggy shore . . . the waves flinging high . . . now the tide retreated . . . it diminished—as the curving bead-strings of light vanished into the cavern's maw. The voices of those within were subdued, a distorted whispering, vanishing into nothingness.

The people of Edwar Kilterberry were going below, into the bowels of the earth, to await the passing of the devastating furnace which would devour the outer world—and to await the coming—of Mugumar.

CHAPTER VII

THE ELEMENTAL BEING

The kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of His wrath has come."

"YOUR play, deacon."

A man stood, listening to the voices which seemed to materialize from the darkness itself, straining his eyes to see where they came from. He had been

wandering about in the pitch-black depths of the abandoned sewer main for an interminable time; he had only a vague idea as to how he got there in the first place. He stood tense in the dark, like a wild beast crouched. This was little more than the shell of a man, from which the inner core had been dessicated, leaving a dry husk almost devoid of former characteristics. Chaotic sensations fluctuated through his remaining consciousness. His nostrils flared as if scenting the air. He hugged the wall as he listened.

Even his own identity was obscure in the mind recesses of this elemental being; it is doubtful that if a voice had suddenly called "Sam Belwine!" across the jet-black depths at the time whether this man-being would have recognized the term, much less have associated his past with memories of that other individual. He had an exceedingly elusive memory, this man who stood there, and his consciousness was subject to rapid disconnected changes over which he strangely had no guidance; he responded to some prevailing urge, demanding that he seek the depths, driving him onward, below the surface of the lighted world, commanding that he survive; nor had his mind been of a condition to question as his steps led inexorably toward the forgotten passages of the ancient sewer. Now he was hungry and thirsty, and lost in labyrinthine tunnels.

His head ached. The sum total of his memory was an endless series of walking through the dark, stumbling over things. More apparent to him were his immediate bodily wants for food and drink, which he recognized with absolutely no effort of analysis. He must gain sustenance. Repeatedly he had slipped on unex-

pected piles of debris, cutting the skin of his hands to bleeding ribbons as he thrust them forth blindly to steady his falling body, bruising various portions of his limbs by crushing concussions with hard surfaces, bewildering the tiny spark of ego which would not die even though the brain, as such, had ceased to function. In places, the overhead structure of the old sewer passages was cracked and sunken beneath the pressure of the overhanging layers of earth. Some sort of small sentient life existed here—he had an inexplicable mental picture of the creatures—inexplicable, since he could not recall having seen one before, although he associated it with the hazy knowledge that they were "rats"—big vicious ones by their squeals. He wondered if they were good to eat, and decided to try them if he could get his hands on one.

INWARD he stumbled through the eternal gloom, guiding his way as best he could by feeling for the wall. Often he had reached into small side pipe openings and once he had done that and touched something soft, slick and alive. He failed to connect the incident with his urgent need of food before his hand flashed involuntarily back. As his mouth watered from hunger, he searched eagerly for it again, but it was gone from groping reach. His interior was crying out avidly with anticipation, and he was never to learn whether it was a snake, toad, or a rat.

Now, standing in impenetrable darkness, he heard voices emanating, seemingly just ahead somewhere. At first they had sounded merely as recurrent noises to his dulled mentality; finally, just as the knowledge that the small animals

were "rats" had come, so did the comprehension that others like himself were here, lost in the eternity of winding tunnels. Without doubt, the words originated beyond some sudden bend ahead of him. He had no cohesive imagination then, nor could he mentally picture a suggestion as to what these beings were like, although he felt a distinct kinship to them. A lethargy hung like a pall over his nerves and body; yet he was unaware of the lethargy. Something prompted him to keep silence and await the return of these strange vibrations that thrilled into his being and brought odd and elusive shapes into his consciousness.

"As I say, Boman," continued the first voice, "it was all there, written in the Good Scripture. Everything just as it happened. That's why I'm here, down below the surface of the earth, and that's why you're here, with the world burning to pieces up there."

The cast of the man who might formerly have been identified as Sam Belwine had no conception of the world "burning to pieces," so the words had no significance; his flight from the surface had been instinctive and mindless, as had been many of his recent motivations. Now he cocked his head aside as the second voice continued, with some intonation expressing impatience.

"Dad blast ye, Deacon! That may be why you're down here, but as for me . . . a bear hibernates, come winter, don't he? An' ol' Pete Boman, he's good ner any bear. Ain't I feel it in muh bones when the rain comes; ain't I?—an' us human bein's are all critters of nachure; I got an ijee there be some of us as catch the warnin's just as good as varmints. Ain't I watched the wild geese, deacon? Ain't I seed the blue-

bird come south? E'en a low-bellied snake crawls away, come the cold spell. He! he! deac'n, I thinks maybe that's why yer here, along with me. He! he! Tain't so unnatur'l fer that, be it? But anyhow, let's forgit about what's happenin', and see if yu can remember to play yer hand."

"Your words are ill chosen, my good fellow. But come, let us not quarrel now. Here we are."

There was a momentary silence. Sam Belwine moved forward, still hugging the left wall. He heard the duller inurmur of other voices, as if more distant, and a shriller one, somehow suggestive of a different sort of being. This higher voice caused a curious thrill to course through Sam's body. What sort of creature was this, with the high-pitched, captivating voice? He moved forward with more rapidity.

Then he heard the voices no longer. Any moment he expected to come upon the speakers, who like himself, inhabited this strange world of endless passages. Several moments later he listened again, but the voices did not come out of the blackness now. He became frantic. His dry mouth hurt and tickled agonizingly when he swallowed. His head was faint. In a sudden panic, he hurried forward, stumbling through Stygian blackness, and abruptly his hand, brushing the left wall, found emptiness and space. A front foot shot out into infinity. He caught hard on his back foot, balanced before the abyss of nothingness. The exertion hurt his ankle, which was hooked before a short rim projection, but it saved him. He fell, and his hands found the lip of the descent, beyond which was nothing but darkness.

HIS heart pounded so hard it hurt with every beat. A lump came in his throat and he could hardly breathe. He felt stifled. Tears came to his eyes. How long he lay there in a state of collapse, he could not know, but eventually a ray of illumination beamed within his consciousness, and he reached into his pocket for a match. His coat was torn badly on the left side; in the right inner pocket he found what he sought.

There were several matches there and a queer packet of tiny cylinders. He struck a match, saw that he squatted on a precipice over which the passageway came to an abrupt end. A big rat ran from behind a rusty projection, disappearing into a murky grotto in the wall. The match burned to his fingers and hurt them. Sam slung it into the abyss, fumbled in the dark, and lighted another. He leaned over the deep descent. At a considerable depth, he perceived the outlines of a larger passageway into which various apertures yawned on a level with his own. He could not know that this had served as a main channel for the sewer, leading shortly to the spot formerly occupied by the municipal sewage disposal plant. His eyes sought the depths, found a slumped, crumpled object lying motionless there, and fastened.

It was something like himself. It had gone along this ledgeway, not knowing of the sink-hole, had shot off into the depths. It lay without motion in a dark splotch, and it was dead. The dark splotch was hardly dry. The elemental being crouched on the ledge, looked at the dark splotch, then at the dried clotted blood on the hands that held the match. Then this being whined hungrily.

A second match burned away. Sam lighted a third. He tried striking the small white cylinders from the packet, whose use he could not understand, but no spark came from them, so he threw them on the ground. A fourth and a fifth match flared into Tartarian gloom. He wandered back along the way he had come, searching into rat-holes and seeking to trap the wary creatures who were afraid of the light. Once he saw a pair of lean old rats, standing in the dark just beyond the light; their eyes gleamed like angry sparks; it frightened him momentarily. But he knew he must have food, so he moved onward. The last match was burning when his vagrant mental machinery recalled the voices, and the beings similar to himself who must have created them.

Blackness again now. It was a bit terrifying, after the light. Those voices had issued from a devious side opening somewhere to his rear. He must go back. He feared that he would never find them now; that seemed a possible calamity. Those human voices had sounded companionable after so many hours of silence. Guiding now with his right hand, he retreated down the passage through which he had come, seeking meanwhile to quiet his throbbing heart and maintain constant vigilance for some indication marking the proximity of those others. He decided to yell to them now, but his throat flamed with pain when he opened his mouth to try to speak, and stabs came from his cracked lips. Long before, in a fit of loneliness, he had shouted until exhausted, but he had desisted at length because the mocking reverberations had disheartened him.

Then the murmur of voices came again. His eyes found a ray of light.

He hastened down a passageway, illumined with faint gloom, which turned abruptly into a chamber of light. He halted at the entrance and observed various people, several squatted before a smooth place in the cement flooring. This chamber was flat of floor, with an arched ceiling; it had once been a massive flood drain that caught the overflow and turned it away from the city. Several candles, stuck in crevices in the wall, formed the illumination.

The elemental man stood in the opening like some wary creature of the wild, his eyes roaming. He saw other people, some of them bared of clothing about the arms and chest, lying on spread bed-clothing farther along the drain. He saw too, a bucket of water, an overturned paper sack, from which the remains of a recent repast obtruded. His crackled lips parted then, and he made a sound expressing his gladness—a rustling, croaking tone coming from tortured vocal cords.

THOSE in the chamber turned startled faces toward the apparition. Mouths gaped open. Sam Belwine had no means of knowing that the internal change had wrought its design in the lines of his face, loosening it here and there along the facial protuberances, distorting the mouth and eyes. He was not aware of the horrified expression mirrored on the faces of all who peered at him. His short, exuberant cry preceded his sudden leap into the larger chamber by but an instant. He flung himself across the space, seized a huge dipperful of water, and drank it with monstrous gulps that hurt his mouth. Then he seized a half-loaf of bread, and it began to vanish between dippers of water.

The awed quiet was shattered by

an intense scream. The twitching face of the elemental being swerved around to glance across the cavern toward the woman who had screamed; his action saved him, making a new danger apparent. He saw the gigantic man who had been playing cards, plunging wrathfully toward him, with his massive foot drawn back to kick.

Sam jerked sidewise, but not soon enough. The toe of the boot caught the corner of his mouth, and he was sent spinning. The bread dropped. His mouth was numb, surrounded by a radiant tingling sensation on his upper face and throat. It was something inhuman, something incredibly demoniac, that rose swiftly to its feet and bunched its muscles to spring. That snarling, white-fanged creature was something vastly different from Sam Belwine, who had lived such a humdrum life on the surface world as a laboratory assistant. That chortling sob, gurgling through the torn crimson lips, was so utterly bestial as to seem impossible to have been issued from human lips; its pitch wailed upward, gained in volume. His outspread clutching hands seemed more elongated. His eyes dilated and fastened upon his torturer.

Perhaps this elemental being was in some ways superior to that other man of the past known as Sam Belwine. Quick flashes came into his brain. He started to spring for the other's throat, but hesitated as the big man jerked his hand to his back pocket. The gesture brought a spasmodic recollection to the elemental's brain. Instead of leaping, he ducked low, seized the loaf of bread and half of a bologna that lay in the paper sack. The gun spat its messenger of death; a tongue of flame licked out after the spiteful crack; the woman screamed again. The bullet

ricocheted away, was followed by the second detonation.

Sam felt a twinge of pain in his side, but he had gained the darkness again now, with the bread and bologna clutched tightly in his arms. Again the revolver spat, out into the dark, but the aim was wild. A candle's feeble glow came into the blackness of the subterranean channel down which he ran; the large man's fearful countenance came close beside it, striving to pierce the gloom. After a short while, the candle retreated from the passage and the Stygian curtains of night again enveloped the flight of the elemental, for pursuit down those tortuous tunnels would have invited ambush; leaving the other would be foolhardy, to say the least. Perhaps he recalled the wolfish scream which had issued from the intruder's mouth as he stood at bay for an instant before them. The big man, realizing the danger of panic, decided that a slight prevarication would not be amiss.

"I reckon I got him," he announced gruffly, as those within the chamber crowded around. "I hit him square, and he dragged himself out of the light."

"Good gravy, Deac'n!" ejaculated the rangy Pete Boman. "What wuz it?" They were hanging on the big man's words; it was up to him to instil confidence in them.

"Probably some fool who came before us," he asserted. "He got lost and went crazy." "Deacon" Ecut noticed the woman then, who was hysterical on the floor. He moistened a cloth and dabbed it about her temples. He held the fragile pink-nailed hands in his own large paw to quiet her convulsive shuddering. Looking up, Ecut encountered a questioning glare from Pete Boman; that appeared to strike the big fellow's hu-

mor. After all, the woman was alone in the company of men. There are certain attributes inbred in human-kind that never allow such facts to be ignored. Her face became flushed, and she exhibited signs of reviving.

CHAPTER VIII

BATTLE TO THE DEATH!

DOUBTLESSLY, Sam Belwine had been a most fearsome object. The drooling expression which accompanies insanity had transformed his features; yet he was not insane in the common sense of the word. He was now occupied in tearing at the chunk of meat with his teeth; he had lain often before in this dark grotto, which was barely large enough to permit the admittance of his body. Now, in eluding pursuit, he sought it instinctively. It debouched upon a large main tunnel and was little more than a crevice formed by a large split in the concrete walls, opened by some earth-tremor in the past; he had come to use it as a lair. Despite his exhaustion from his recent exertions, he consumed the meat and bread with greedy rapidity.

His breath came in great laboring gusts, even after the last crumb had disappeared. So it was that he did not notice the presence of the rat. Before, he had lain in wait, seeking to beguile these wary creatures into his reach. The stench of the food had attracted them in ravenous numbers. Sam's hand, groping over the ragged cement, came into contact with one of the rats, which was exceptionally without caution. He remembered his former attempts, closed his hand to capture it; its sharp teeth bit into his palm; it slipped away with a squeal of terror.

The loss of the rat was lessened by his abated hunger—perhaps it was then born in his brain that the animals might be lured into his hands by spreading crumbs as bait.

A persistent twinge of his arm captured his attention. A bullet had passed through the fleshy part of his left arm, above the elbow. The wound was not serious, but its bleeding was slow to cease. By curling up, he could reach the wound with his tongue. Licking soothed it. For the first time in what seemed an eternity, Sam Belwine relaxed and slept. Beyond the black crevice the great rats ran in droves, for they too feared the surface now, and their avarice was increasing with their need for food, although not yet would they approach the body in the alcove.

TIME, as a relative measure of existence, had ceased for Sam Belwine. When he awoke, he did not know how many hours had lapsed, but he was again hungry. His wounds were covered with coarse, healthy scabs, and he was sore. There were times when he had kaleidoscopic interregnums of comparative sanity; then there were complete vacancies, after which he discovered himself in some other portion of the underground burrows, but always he found his way back; those dark tunnels became as familiar to his touch as the upper streets had been to his sense of sight. He was particularly drawn toward the tiny colony of human beings who dwelt in a section of the ancient storm drain. Hour on hour he sat watching them, looking out from the darkness which hid his body from their unsuspecting eyes. No more did he attempt to communicate with them; something warned him that his advances would be unwelcome.

He saw that the large man, and the gaunt one, frequently muffled their bodies with clothing and climbed up a large ladder. They were not gone long, but they always returned laden with meats and sacks of provisions. Most precious of all were the buckets of water. Sometimes Sam grew almost frantic, watching them drink the sparkling liquid. He heard them speak of the "storage plant" for which they were "almighty thankful," and he sensed dimly that it was overhead, at the end of the ladder somewhere, although he did not connect their trips up the ladder with this oft-repeated term; he knew that they dreaded the trips too.

Each time the sleeping period came around, which it did with cyclic regularity, Sam Belwine crept like a shadow across sleeping forms. He took deep draughts of the water and removed as much of the food as his stomach craved.

The water was most important. He had learned now to catch rats by baiting them with crumbs. Oftimes he roved endlessly through the burrows; once when he awoke, he had to fight off a veritable army of rats; but he was not afraid, and he killed six or eight of the creatures before they fled. He grew so accustomed to the darkness that he could traverse great lengths in total darkness, without aid of his hand. This ability did not seem abnormal to him. It was as though his body had established a strange connection with other masses; the inability to use his organs of vision did not detract greatly from his conscious motivation, such as it was.

Watching the clan of people in the drain did much to distract his attention. Under his surreptitious espionage, these people were under-

going a steady metamorphosis. Their bright, watchful features were smoothing out into duller facial masks; their eyes lost the searching keenness and became lusted with listless films. The big man who was called "Deacon," and the rawboned man with the drawl who answered to "Pete Boman" were among the first to be affected. Then there was the woman.

Sam Belwine could not understand the strange attraction of this yellow-haired creature who sat for hour on hour, polishing and tinting the nails of her fingers and toes with a roseate liquid substance she withdrew from a little bottle. Her hair was streaked and fell in a tangle; her features were smudgy and grimy. Her clothing became tattered and torn. Only her fingers and toes were kept immaculate, hued with the pink polish. She avoided the presence of the Deacon and Pete Boman as much as possible—cringing when either of them watched her closely. And as relative time slid slowly by in its inexorable band, never faltering, yet monotonized and lengthened incredibly by the excruciating circumstances, she too underwent a subtle change.

The elemental, lying in the darkness, understood almost from the start that the Deacon and Pete Boman were to quarrel over the woman. That had been evident in their looks and glances.

It had been long since the men in storm-drain had played with the dog-eared cards. There were seven men, besides the woman. Deacon and Pete Boman dominated the male contingency. It would be with them that trouble would begin.

With increasing ease, Sam stole his wants from the occupied chamber during the sleeping periods. The

men were experiencing a growing lassitude. Spoken words were few. Names were not recalled now. Their wants were communicated largely by gestures. Pete Boman and the Deacon still alternated with the men on going up the ladder for provisions.

The rats would encircle the black passages, looking in upon the illuminated expanse of the storm drain. They were not greatly afraid of the beings who moved within the shroud of illumination. Yet they feared Sam Belwine, even in the dark, for he knew the instant they approached, and would reach out with groping hands. Even the rats sensed something different in Sam. They abandoned their curious line of watch in the passages before the storm drain, scuttling into the deeper darkness, when Sam came, as he did often.

THE rats became gaunt and lean. On one occasion they beat Sam to the provisions, and it made him very angry. Where the animals got water Sam didn't know. He had a fond attachment for the rats—he loved to capture them; very often he allowed them to live after he had them safely in his hands; their frightened squeals and scampering feet were the only sounds that intruded upon the remote fastnesses of his dark burrows; they gave a sense of companionship.

His wounds were almost healed now; something held him close to the storm drain, hidden in the darkness. He noted that the humans within were very scantily clothed now. In the intense heat that crept down to them, even here, they had discarded most of their raiment. Deacon had accused Pete Boman of eating their provisions while the rest of them slept, and Pete was surly. He scowled at the woman from under beetling

brows. As she sat, rubbing her long toe-nails with a stick, he placed a hand on her shoulder, and she looked up with a startled jerk.

The Deacon was alert; this was the spark, kindling the fuse to all those pent-up emotions which had been gathering. Shouting angrily, he struck Boman across the head with his fist. The gaunt man was knocked sidewise, but he did not fall to the ground. Gathering himself, he launched upon the Deacon with the fury of a catamount.

As the woman whimpered and crawled backward, the two men struggled for supremacy, each of them almost soundless, except for their rapid breathing and the impact of their blows, their every action denoting a struggle to the death. Around them clustered the five other men, watching almost without emotion; from the darkness another beady set of eyes stared on.

Back and forth the two men fought, often falling to the floor of the drain channel. They kicked, gouged, and bit each other. The Deacon's scalp was torn; blood dribbled down, blinding one of his eyes. They had battled, using only their natural weapons—their hands, teeth and feet. Now, for the first time, the Deacon appeared to remember that there were other means of combat. His lips split in a grin. He avoided the rush of the rawboned man so deftly that Pete Boman struck the wall beyond. His breath was knocked from him. He wheeled and leaned against the walls, regaining his strength, with his hands pressed to either side, ready to fling him toward the other with renewed vigor. He was never to leap forward. The Deacon had drawn his revolver. Now he thrust it forward. Three times the gun spat; with each explosion a lead

slug tore into the bare breast of Pete Boman.

The man against the wall slid down slowly, crumpling over on his face. Deacon stood dumbly, pocketed the smoking weapon, wiped the blood from one eye. Then he smiled at the woman. The yellow-haired one had arisen now. Her terror was melting perceptibly. She had not been without interest in the tragic fight. As Deacon came toward her, the other men moved aside, but she did not flinch. She took a cloth and wiped the blood from his wound. Deacon was exhausted; he sprawled down to a sitting posture. His eyes did not leave the woman, but a torpor spread over them. Drowsiness tugged at his lids as she rubbed his wounds soothingly.

He was soon asleep; the others were not long in following. Their regular sleep period had arrived. The dead body was disregarded; it lay where it had fallen.

For a long while the candles sputtered in their niches. There had been several boxes of the candles—six of them had been burning continuously. After a while, the heavy breathing of the men became louder. The rats came out into the edges of the light. One of them found a farflung crumb; his fellows saw it, and there was a tussle. They squealed, and one of the sleeping men stirred. The rats looked attentively, but the movement was not repeated.

A soft footfall came from the darkness. Instantly, the rats fled from the light, striking for their holes in the walls as if the devil himself were after them. For a long time, the expanse of light was broken by no visible move, but the dark acquired an ominous suspense. Finally a shadow moved slowly from the outskirts, and Sam Belwine, the

transformed Sam Belwine, came blinking into the candle-glow. Stealing forward cautiously, his stooped figure, now naked except for tattered trousers, cast distorted shadows on the ceiling, mingling there with the gloom of the shaft up which the ladderway extended. He strode to the bucket of water and drank deep; as he paused by the food, his eyes alighted upon a long-bladed butcher knife with which these beings, similar yet dissimilar to himself, had cut their meat and bread. He had little appetite for the dried ham, or the eggs such as he had often sucked approvingly before, despite their incipient stages of decay. He picked up the knife, using it awkwardly. His wandering eyes roved over the sleeping bodies, and he began to move ponderously. He paused once as he stood over the sleeping Deacon, then grasping the knife in both hands, he plunged it downward.

THERE was no struggling. His hands quieted the spasmodic movements of the body; the knife plugged the flow of blood which would have spurted. Sam sensed the departure of life, and he turned, scooped up the body of the woman, with one hand clutched across her mouth so she could not scream.

Sam had encompassed the entire exploit with very little noise, yet one of the men awakened and shouted brokenly. He heard other cries, subdued as if by extreme terror; those awakening eyes could have caught but a glimpse as the darkness swallowed him and his burden. Just before he left the last fringe of twilight, he looked down and saw that the woman was watching him through wide eyes; her body seemed rigid and paralyzed, as if from shock. As before, the wraithly ap-

pearance of the invader inspired such a cold chill in the hearts of those who had perceived him, that there was no pursuit.

Sam Belwine staggered on and on through the gloom. He heard the rats retreating before his advance. The woman reposed in his arms wakefully, her warm breath panting on his neck. She had uttered no sound. But for Sam, as he stalked onward, other things were happening. Something else was changing.

He felt a snap within his head. An obstruction blocked his way in the lightless passage, almost threw him from balance; he clutched the woman closer. He couldn't feel—as he had in the past—the presence of the burrows—at least, not quite so well. Had the presence of the woman changed things? A rat queeked, and he shuddered.

The rodents were not fleeing from him now. Curious; how quickly they had discovered that he was now afraid! They were all about his feet. One was nipping his toes, sending an icy chill up his spine. Sam kicked out and strode on.

He stumbled past his crevice where he had lain so often, without glancing at it. The hidden lair slipped back behind him. A mist was forming in Sam's brain. Through the mist he envisioned a dawning through a fog. The fog was lightening in patches. Moving like an automaton, he struggled on.

Those rats. He mustn't let them get to his precious burden. What was it? A woman; yes, he mustn't let them to it. How dark this place was! Where was it? His imagination stirred—for the first time—in this eternity of existence which had been so long. He wondered vaguely where he was . . . for what purpose had he come into this dark pit . . . now he

could see the telescope almost as plain as real . . . and . . .

His employer, bending over a photographic plate. He was calling . . . calling Sam . . . where was Sam . . . coming . . . coming . . .

Sam Belwine had recalled the way out. There was no confusion in his brain. He remembered the sunken well in a deserted rural section, recalled how he had thrown aside the criss-crossing logs, resting on the rotting framework—he had been frantic then, from a fear of something above—he could hardly recall that dread now—

In a few moments he fought up an incline, pushed out into a funnel-shaped depression of crumbling earth and stone. Sam thought it was night, but he could see no stars. Overhead were the bulking forms of parallel logs, placed across the enclosure to guard it against unwary hunters and trespassers.

Then he understood. A jagged streak of lightning shot across the sky, limning the fungi-encrusted logs with its momentary glimmer. The following rumble of thunder seemed to crackle the heavens and shake the foundations of the earth. The clouds overhead were tumbling and tossing. He saw tinier splinters passing between the rolling clouds—tiny because of distance; the sound too was diminutized by the upper air to a shattering that compared to the tinkle of breaking glass. Sam felt the first drops of rain spattering into his upturned face. Clambering over the logs, he reached solid earth and laid the woman gently down upon the ground, for she was crying. Then he stood motionless, letting the cool, invigorating drops of water trickle across his bare features and exposed limbs.

CHAPTER IX

SUB-HUMAN MADNESS

BART KEPLER had discovered that Professor Cardithe's first name was Allan. It seemed so ludicrous to associate him with so human a name. For a long time he dwelt upon the fact, pondering until he was almost hysterical. The vagaries of his mind had been almost uncontrollable during the monotony of waiting. Now the darkness and death which had spread out over the surface world seemed almost alive, malignantly so, and it was encroaching into their last retreat as they waited at bay. The world outside was a graveyard of the dead, haunted by the ghostly beings of the semi-dead. He felt that he was a part of the necropolis, worse than inanimate, for he was bounded by the narrow walls of the laboratory confinement.

Professor Cardithe had not been communicative of late. He took an interest in the half-humans who came into view through the window. The sun had been hidden for several days by gathering clouds of water vapor. Eora seemed not to be aware of their circumstances at times; she talked of flowers, and streams, of parties, picnics, week-ends in the mountains. It hurt Bart, deep inside, to see her, with her eyes shining, quite apparently lost in retrospection of a world in the vanished past. What agonized most was the realization of the present, which must eventually supercede her transcendent thoughts.

At last Bart could bear the silence no longer. He turned and spoke.

"Do you see any change, Allan?" he asked. The words were flat, craz-

ily out of key. Allan. Calling the Professor that!

Cardithe turned, looking blank. Then he laughed. There was something ineffably funny about the word; like all funny things, it was inexplicable in its funniness. It just happened to go over, and there was Eora, laughing and beating her breasts. Oh, how inane! Damn it, but silly! He wanted to stop laughing, and couldn't. Tears came to his eyes. When he tried to speak, they broke forth simultaneously with fresh spasms, and the professor joined them, but something hard rose in his throat. At last he quelled the sobs to choke:

"That was unexpected! It certainly hit my funny bone!" After Cardithe said that, it didn't seem humorous any more, and they dried their tears.

"I haven't heard dad called Allan for a long time," said Eora, with glistening eyes. "It reminds me of the time we went fishing at Newport. Dad caught a whale or something and everyone rushed to the side of the barge. It tipped over, and we had to be rescued by a neighboring fishing boat. The sailors that picked us up called Dad 'Allan', and made him row right along with them."

"At least," explained Allan Cardithe, "they did not recognize the superiority of amassed knowledge. I was just another human to them. My hands were solid blisters for a week!"

Bart saw Eora's flushed features and diverted the subject; it wouldn't do to think too much of the past. Compared with the present, and the lightless laboratory, it presented Elysian colors and contrasts.

"I gather you've no objection to being called by your first name," said Bart. "I learned of it from Eora, and

I've been thinking of it ever since."

"Certainly not," returned Allan Cardithe. "In some respects, our present situation resembles that interesting little escapade in our past. Here, despite my erudite past, in which I've crammed my cranium with much of man's available intelligence, accumulated during his evolution into this world, I am just another man. It is a truism that all movement is not progress. It seems to follow up that all learning is not necessarily progress."

"Good gracious, Dad," remonstrated Eora. "Don't be so gloomy. Don't forget it was your knowledge that enabled us to avert the danger in the first place. If I had ventured out into those ultra-rays, it might have ruined my permanent."

THIS second attempt at jocularity fell short. "To what end," queried the scientist thoughtfully, "have we retreated here? The end may well be merely staved off for a short time. Nature has small respect for any of her component parts. Remember that we are a component part of Nature, and not the master of Nature. Because we can term ourselves intelligent beings, we have come to assume a mastery of our conditions that is entirely superficial. Our mastery of other forms of life depends primarily upon the conditions remaining exactly as they were. In the ages to come, a new form of life, adapted to these new rays, would indubitably arise to oust man from his proud enthronement. I think that man has never been the master; on the contrary, he has been cuddled by the elements, nurtured by existing environments, which are as ephemeral and ever-changing as the seasons, as cyclic as the browning of leaves in autumn."

"How hopeless!" ejaculated Eora.

"I see your point," declared Bart. "That may be right. It does not necessarily mean that our—extenuating circumstances, propitious to the development of humankind—are terminated. At least—those favorable conditions of which we speak may yet return."

"I agree. As a scientist, I am filled with omnipotent foreboding. As a philosopher and a member of the homo sapiens, I retain hope. Yet you must realize that there are certain recognizable stages in the development of a planet. There is the beginning, and the end. There is the primeval inchoate stage, in which it may exist in a gaseous, or liquid form, of a very high temperature. Then there is the extreme opposite, the end of the planet, subsequent to the departure of internal and external heat. Between these two periods are other stages, set off by constitutional factors, with the element of chance thrown in. There will be that period most favorable to the propagation of man, with a declination beyond into the future and back into the past. But how certain it seems that human life could not exist, either in the primal stage, or in the final stage of this planet. Great changes come too suddenly to be encompassed by the graduated changes of evolutionary life. Or do they? Have we existed as pristine atoms in that heating caldron of the sun? Even if we perish, will our beings be enfolded in other forms of sentience which will exist as a frozen world? Perhaps unlike us in form, are these eventual scions of evolution, but for all, a mere component of the natural physical world, just as we are. Even now, with extinction so eminent, we take ourselves too seriously." Professor Cardithe

had become enthusiastic; now he paused, and peered at his listeners with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes," he said, "after all and all, I think I should like for you to call me Allan."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Eora. "If Dad gets any more pessimistic, he'll have me feeling so low that extinction will be a blessing undisguised. I feel like a distorted molecule already."

"I'm glad we've a fellow like him to share our last hours, for a' that," declared Bart sincerely. "And that's no air-pocket."

"With two so wonderfully brave men—an aviator, and one of our world's best scientists, and for your sake, Bart, I'll say the world's best fog-navigator—aground—" enunciated Eora with a senatorial air, "I'll say I'm glad to die. Or am I? Well, anyway, that's no extraction from a college radical paper, and I'll exclaim for that!"

IT WAS three human beings now, shorn of all but their best instincts, who indulged in the mock gravity of shaking hands "all around" and drinking a tumbler of water to commemorate the event. But they felt better for it. Under the circumstances, surrounded by a world beleaguered, it was inane, senseless. Yet it was paramourly natural that they should have periods of lighter gaiety; during these moments hope glimmered more steadily upon their bleak horizon. One of man's most saving graces is his sense of humor. Never, even during these ridiculous instants snatched from the tragedy of their trapped existence, were their pitiable weapons far from hand, and ever they were aware of the grotesque half-humans, roving intermit-

tently about the exterior of the house.

Later, when the two men were alone, the professor became grave. "Above everything," he admonished, "we must strive not to become as those half-humans have become. I have been attempting to study them, to judge what has occurred by their actions and responses."

"There's not much doubt as to their general insanity," affirmed Bart. "They are on a par with wild creatures."

"Insanity," soliloquized the professor. "Insanity? Yes, in one sense of the word. In another, no."

Bart looked at the other in surprise.

"If we judge insanity by its common meaning," continued Cardithe, "I cannot agree. There are different forms of insanity, with several differing distinctions. One who has no iota of intelligence might be dubbed a hopeless lunatic. A lunatic is harmless, since he has neither the will nor the power to do harm. I think you will agree that these half-humans are different."

"I certainly do!" cried Bart emphatically. "Those devils would do anything to get to us. I've noticed several prowling around all day. They seem to sense, in some way, that we are here."

"Ah!" said the scientist, "there you are! In that way, they do possess a sort of sense. Yet a lunatic is disconnected entirely with senses or faculties. The insane person who is really dangerous possesses a brain that is partially normal, partially receptive, yet is malevolent and brutal by nature. He has in his power the ability to do great harm. Sometimes these symptoms of lunacy are chronic in appearance; often the defective brain is revealed by manias, or ob-

sessions. The brain may be considered as abnormal or diseased. Yet neither of these broad classifications include the half-humans.

"Look!—there is one now. Tell me—what motivation is driving those blackened limbs? What purpose controls the nerve fibers, the tissue cells? If we knew that, we would come close to solving the riddle of what actually took place when the unaccustomed rays drove past the stratospheric barrier in space."

Bart followed the gesturing finger. Beyond the window paced a hideous travesty of man, a monstrous ebony half-human with protruding sightless eyes and swollen lips which kept constantly in a gargoyle grin. Its steps were uncertain as to direction, yet the hideous creature did not stumble over chance obstructions—nor did the blind head move from its gnarled position over one shoulder.

"Look at it!" ejaculated Cardithe in a rising tone. "See it move across and back. It is blind, man! It can't see. It can't feel! Yet it never falters, never stumbles."

Bart followed the repugnant black figure of the naked giant. There was something ghastly about it—something amoebic. He said so. It moved about, restless as living protoplasmic cells.

"That's hitting at it!" The scientist was trembling now, clutching at the sill for support. "It's grasping at it, but like my conjectures, it slips back between the fingertips of logic. There is a purpose driving that monstrous transformation. I can't think but that the mind, as we know it, has been destroyed totally, as much as if the man were already dead. That is a dead body, stalking there! Blood still circulates, its lungs draw in air, and its belly knows hunger, but it is a dead corpse. It knows no

evil, for its soul has perished. It seeks us simply because we are food. It is motivated by the same driving power that urges on the simple one-celled amoeba. Perhaps this is grasping at something which Man can never comprehend. But I swear, by the presiding God over All, that yonder walks a dead cadaver!"

"You are hysterical!" protested Bart. Cardithe was hanging before the window, as limp as a rag. His eyes were riveted on the monstrous half-human as though held by insidious mesmerism. Great beads of sweat stood out on his brow. His brief moment of hope had been followed by a reaction akin to approaching delirium. Bart started forward, but Cardithe waved him back with a weak gesture.

"I know! I know!" he shouted wildly. "I'm all right, I tell you. What was it brought the amoebic slime up the evolutionary scale? Intelligence? Intelligence! Ha, but I say that an amoeba has no intelligence. What drove it up, up, up, past the multi-celled spawn of ocean life, out on lands, to the vertebrates? What shoved them up to the threshold of what we call Intelligence; what led elementary creatures to the doorway of Man's conception? That then, I say, is the spark within the half-humans, within those blackened bodies, stalking like automatons, eating, living, but dead; something given out of the electronic whirl of the atoms, inherent to the molecule!"

Cardithe's words came spasmodically. As he spoke, the monster outside turned slowly, as if aware of the scientist's presence.

"You hear me, damn you!" spat Cardithe, shaking his fist. "You do hear me, don't you? You sense me, then. Your intelligence is burned out. Your soul—has gone. There's nothing

left but a corpse that has not died, a body that does not seek the grave."

The half-human had not paused; it resumed its mechanical tread, back and forth before the window. Perhaps the professor's hysteria was contagious through suggestion. Bart could not still the icy quivering that assailed his spine, accompanying a nauseating conviction that the creature did sense them, in some way not recognizable. He feared it then, for walls could never shut aside that knowledge, nor could the blasphemous flesh know despair or impatience; it would follow them always, inexorably, until it ceased to exist, or until they died. Bart thrust the idea from him, jerked forward.

"See here, sir!" he snorted savagely. "You'll have to shut up. You understand, sir! There's Eora! And I! We'll go mad. We—"

Professor Cardithe looked up; his features sagged. Again he waved the other from him. "You're right!" he gasped. "I lost control! I did, for a fact. Good Lord, I lost control for a moment." He seemed shaken profoundly by the fact. "I—" He stopped speaking, as though halted by some dread he did not care to reveal.

"It shall not happen again, Bart," he promised, turning away from the window. "It shall not happen again."

CHAPTER X

DEATH CLAIMS ITS OWN

IT WAS night. What had awakened Bart, he knew not. Yet he was up, leaning rigidly on his elbow, striving to hear the noise or to seek the disturbance that had awakened him. He could see the misty oblong of the window. Hair stood up over his arms in goose-

pimples. His eyes hurt. He turned them back into the deeper blacknesses. What was it? He heard it again, a soft shuffling sound, scratching against a wooden portion of the house.

He thrust himself upright, grasped the shotgun, and as he did, he made a scraping noise on the cement. Would it hear? Would it cease? It wasn't at the window. How was he so certain it wasn't Cardithe, or Eora?

Again the rustling sound. Its vibration traversed the blood of his flowing veins. A low muffled thumping came—the patter of heavy footfalls. He looked upward, transfixed. The sounds came from above. Whatever it was, was up there, in the main house, seeking to get down.

Worse luck!—of all the entrances that was least barricaded. It consisted of a flight of steps leading up against the door to the kitchen. He recognized the position of the sound now. It was shoving at the door. Working swiftly, Bart leaped across the flooring, feeling his way with his hands. He reached beneath a huddle of broken-down chairs, withdrew the reserve can of kerosene. His hands trembled as he sought the largest lamp, dusty from disuse. It had been many days now since they had utilized the illuminators; he unscrewed the wick socket, and in his hurry spilled part of the fluid, slipped it back into position. The striking of the match grated like a file across his nerves. The flame caught, burned feebly, brightened. Again came the insistent scratching on the wood partition.

"What is it?" He saw Cardithe's startled face, peering up from the blankets.

"I don't know," whispered Bart. "It's upstairs. Stay back behind me.

It awakened me. Have you got the revolver?"

Cardithe arose feverishly. He was almost fully clothed. The gun was in his hand; he had withdrawn it from under the pillow as he arose.

"All right," he rasped. "Go ahead."

Bart thought of awakening Eora, but again there came the scratching on wood, louder this time, then a splintering sound, as of the wood-work giving away. Holding the lamp in his left hand, he walked down the passageway, the shotgun in his right hand. He thought of firing the weapon, and shifted the lamp back to Cardithe with a meaning look.

"Hold it," he demanded, breaking the gun to make sure it was loaded. "Good. I'll be ready to fire." Snapping it back into place, he drew back the trigger. The rays of light sought out the wooden bannisters, slanting on either side of the steps. An old bench, propped against the door, suddenly moved, slid to the floor with a clatter. Bart heard the squeak of rusty hinges, saw a dark crack opening as the door swung back.

A MASSIVE face, black as the depths of outermost space, ghastly as a caricature of hate, yet with eyes glowing as from the fires of hell, thrust down into the doorway. A monstrous bloated body, blackened and unclothed, moved ponderously, carrying the twisted gargantuan face.

"It's the half-human!" That was Cardithe. His voice was so tremulous as to sound like some other man speaking.

"Yes. Hold quiet. I'm going to shoot!" There was no hurry, no excitement, in the slow descent of the monster. Aiming for the crooked forehead, Bart steadied his aim, pulled the trigger. An answering

flash of fire belched forth from the muzzle. The detonation was multiplied by crashing reverberations.

Bart, unable to believe his eyes, stared at the monster, whose warped forehead had been torn completely away by the load of buckshot. Blood welled into the wound; but aside from a jerking motion, the advance of the half-human did not hesitate. Implacably it strode, one inflated foot descending, then the other. The gruesome remnants of flesh, fringing the crushed brow, were flecked with running ribbons of blood. But the motion had been in no way impeded.

Paralyzed into inaction, Bart stood at the bottom of the steps. One gigantic hand reached out, hurled the gun from his hands. It clattered against a wall and fell to the floor. Again the hand reached out, clutched for him. He fell sidewise. The slanting blow bowled him across the room; clawing nails ripped away his shirt and left striped marks on Bart's shoulder. He lay in a heap; then struggled to one knee.

If he had ever feared for the inner staunchness or the will control of the scientist, he was never to doubt again. Cardithe stood almost motionless, one hand holding the flickering lamp, the other clutching the revolver awkwardly, but viciously. His teeth clamped tight upon the lower lip; a trickle of blood came down and fell upon his chin. But he did not retreat. He carefully aimed the gun, pulled the trigger. A bullet sped across the short space, even as the hands reached out to seize him, imbedding in the base of the great gash torn by the buckshot discharge.

The mountainous lump of flesh slumped to the floor like a sack. It lay inert, nor did the muscles twitch.

Cardithe swayed, sat the lamp on the floor, and turned to Bart.

"It's what I've suspicioned. It's the pituitary gland!"

"At least they're vulnerable."

"Yes, but not through the conscious action of their brain, which is a dead organ, as far as a mind is concerned. I realized that all conscious action had ceased; my bullet was a bit more awkward than an operating knife, but it reached the medulla, a portion of the brain just over the spinal chord, which is the seat of all involuntary activities. This certainly upholds my supposition that the actions of these half-humans are entirely involuntary.

"My presumption is that these ultra-rays from space destroyed the functioning of the cerebrum, which contains what we know as the gray matter; all powers of sensation, of voluntary motion and what we call intellect, reside herein. Through the destruction of the cerebrum, the cerebellum's value, which acts as a co-ordinating center or a relay station, would be demolished. These identical emanations may have excited the pituitary gland, to function as I believe it did in the past, before the cerebrum and the cerebellum were necessary attachments in the elemental man's make-up."

BART felt a trifle ashamed; he had not made a good showing, compared to Cardithe's calm disposal of the diabolical creation. He brushed himself off, rearranging what remained of his clothing. He dabbed a cloth over his bleeding shoulder; the blood flow was coagulating with comforting rapidity.

"Let's hope it came alone!" he uttered vehemently.

"I think that a study of reflex actions might be of value in understanding these poor things better," asserted the Professor interestedly.

"These are actions that exist in a normal body, performed without mediation of any of the conscious centers. The very fact that these bodies have continued cohesive action, subsequent to the dissipation of intellect, tends to substantiate the electrical theory of nerve impulse. How else could this creature have walked in an outside world, lived in an outside world, without sight, smell, or the sense organs? I'm convinced that the excited pituitary gland, through the medium of the nerve system, utilized some electrical manifestation, perhaps part of the circumambient magnetic flux of masses, to make for its awareness of exterior objects. This pitiable thing here was merely responding to an urge to survive. It had no conscious thought of evil, for its intellect died that day the comet passed."

Professor Cardithe was stooped over the prostrate body, examining it intently. Apparently, he entertained none of the animosity that had been displayed in his former outburst. In view of the repulsive body, lying beneath the lamp's glare, with its black abnormal flesh accentuated by a pool of darkening crimson, Bart could not share the other's professional interest.

"I'm willing to admit that you may be right," he proclaimed determinedly. "But despite that, I'm glad it's him. Before we barricade the door again, I'm going to go up into the upper part of the laboratory and make sure he was on a solo flight!"

Disregarding the professor's alarmed remonstrance, he seized the lamp, obtained the transparent helmet attachment of one of the ultra-vi armors, and leaped up to the head of the flight of steps, his face encased in the glass hood. For a moment, he stood on the threshold,

then vanished from sight. His footsteps diminished in audibility, came to a stop, then increased in volume as he made his way back. When he returned, there was a frown on his forehead; he closed the door and came down more slowly. Eora had been awakened; she stood at her father's side.

"Please try not to be frightened," cautioned Bart in a dull voice, as he replaced the helmet upon a table that was replete with scientific paraphernalia. Glass tubes, beakers and retorts, cast shifting lines of reflection as he moved with the lamp in his hand.

"I could see out of a broad window in the upper laboratory. There's a fire in the other part of town, sweeping this way, and I believe that the half-humans are retreating in this direction; at any rate, there's a swarm of them coming this way. They almost completely surround the house."

"Then we'll have to prepare for them," declared Cardithe hurriedly, for he realized any time spent in pondering this new menace would serve only to intensify its more dreadful aspects. "We can only hope that we will not have to go out among them."

Making as much haste as possible, they barricaded the door again. This time they made sure that the half-humans would have to possess super-human strength to crash through. Eora looked a bit dazed; otherwise she displayed an admirable calm. Bart had an odd idea that she was becoming resigned to the probability of death. Cardithe became very self-controlled. The definite approach of any new danger served to call his strong points to the fore. His face was almost impassionate. With every entrance barred, they again re-

turned to the little window. The lamp's glow, falling on the transparent panel, picked out several of the goblin countenances of the half-humans, pressed against the window. Oddly enough, they made no attempt at breaking through the glass.

A flash of brilliant light outlined the black figures, then was gone. Cardithe extinguished his lamp, for he felt that it might attract unwanted attention.

"The blaze must be approaching rapidly," acclaimed Bart, noting the flickering luminance beyond the window. Eora's voice came out of the dark in an eerie whisper.

"It's not a fire. It's lightning!"

"Lightning!" Professor Cardithe was galvanized. "Lightning! Can it be?"

"She's right," returned Bart, scarcely noticing the other's agitation. "There's a storm coming up. I saw a bolt of lightning strike down into the town. It must have set the fire. All we can hope for is rain."

"Well said," acclaimed Eora. "Your wish is accounted for. See the aberration on the pane. It is—starting to rain. If you've another wish left—for goodness sake—wish—"

HER words died in her throat. The lightning came in such a swift succession of splintering bolts that the outside was illuminated, domed over by traceries of lightning-tongues, as clearly as by day. The fiery luminance on the horizon was dulled by contrast. The huddle of half-humans was clearly perceptible; their gargoyle features were turned blindly up toward the jagged tracers which leaped dynamically across the sky.

"Oh, Father in Heaven!" Cardithe's voice was unbelieving. "Why

had I not thought before? Why did I not importune? Why had I not sought faith in Your mercy?"

He was a very bent old man one instant; the next he seemed to straighten. The lightning caught his figure as it approached the window. Each picture was an instantaneous splinter of still motion, flashing across the consciousness with irregular procession. Each scene was vivid with kaleidoscopic contrast. As yet, the rainfall had not thickened perceptibly. Beyond the window the half-humans stood motionless. They seemed to be waiting . . . waiting . . .

It would be a terrible storm. The thunder shook the house from eaves to foundation. A breath of cold wind swept in from the cracks and crevices in doors and windows, carrying with it the refreshing scent of impregnated water vapor. All of that evaporated water, sucked up from a parched earth, would deluge down.

"It will put out the fire," ventured Bart. "I've seen some real typhoons. I can tell storms when I see them coming. I'm glad I'm not out in the air tonight." Instinctively, his arm encircled the girl, but his words had brought the old exultation of riding a high wind, the triumph which comes exhilaratingly, after the storm has been buffeted and the machine-made wings of man soar above the clouds. Was he glad, after all, that he wasn't out there, in a trim plane, propeller roaring and tearing into the gale, hands gripping the controls?

"It will do more than that," prophesied the scientist. "It will do the one thing we have been praying for, hoping for! The discharge of high voltage electricity will create ozone, even as it does in the laboratory, on a magnificent scale. After the storm, the ozone layer will again

be flung as a protective barrier against space, guarding us from the grim immutable laws which exist in the absolute zero!"

That was hard to realize. It was more unbelievable than all they had gone through. It just couldn't seep into Bart's brain. He came close to the window. Beyond the glass he could see sheets of rain, driving hard against the window. The lightning came intensely, even after the downpour became steady, capturing briefest glimpses of raindrops in the mid-action of their falling transit.

Puddles formed in depressions, overflowing with thickening streams that ran across the lawns, carrying the accrued silt, running in brackish, gurgling rivulets about the forms of dark obstructions, lying there in the mud.

The half-humans were no more.

The ancient, instinctive power of the pituitary glands had been relegated, with the ultra-radionic emanation, back to the obsolete past. With the return of the ozone barrier to the atmosphere, the rightful dead had gone to its own!

CHAPTER XI

THE NEW EARTH

THE people of Edwar Kilterberry came up from the great cavern in irregular groups, driving their live stock before them. They did not sing and shout. Mugumar had not come. The sun was shining brightly, but it revealed a new world to their eyes. They were enwrapped with silent awe. The earth was black and seared as though from the ravaging of a blazing conflagration.

Edwar made quite a ceremony of loosening the pigeons from a cage.

The pigeons flew over a stunted sapling of a tree, disdaining its perch, and settled uncertainly to the blackened ground. From the parched soil, a tiny sprig of green stuck up. The male pigeon pecked the blade of grass, picking it out by the roots, and with much strutting and cooing, held it forth for his mate to share. The hen took his whole-hearted gratitude for granted and devoured the sprig entirely, whereat they set out in search of other blades of grass.

"This black ground is pretty smooth," said a man, kicking over the damp surface soil with his toe. "It would be good for plowing."

SAM BELWINE'S memories were hazy in his mind; he explained them to Professor Cardithe as best he could. The scientist seemed to understand and take the presence of the woman for granted, for which Sam was greatly relieved.

Eora was astonished. She knew the woman. It was the Dentiline Princess. Fortunately, the poor woman remembered very little of her experiences; the period spent underground was a blank in her mind.

"It has been a dreadful experience," said Professor Cardithe. "But we can build civilization back again, in time. First, we'll get enough men together to get the local electric source functioning. Then I intend to send out a radio call. All the survivors can gather to this city. We must see to it that public utilities continue. The arts and mechanics must not be lost. The trained men must apply themselves diligently toward the preservation of their learning. We will build civilization back, in time."

He was greatly encouraged. Each day saw the arrival of new sur-

vivors, coming to the metropolis by car or afoot. Many had recognized the dangers, as Cardithe had, and prepared for it. The properties of the ultra-violet ray had been common knowledge, and many of them were forewarned. Jed Rickens had not died in vain. Others had fled to caverns and underground retreats. The partial suffusion of deleterious rays had caused partial reversions toward the primitive, as had happened in the case of Sam Belwine, but the return of the old order of things had brought them back to normal.

EPILOGUE

THE man came from the hangar and glanced at the sky with a speculative eye. Beyond the hangar, the orchard trees were green, with fruit upon their branches. Great flocks of pigeons wheeled over the distant fields. Grass grew luxuriant beyond the landing field. Over the hill went the lean familiar figure of a man he knew. We will build civilization back, in time—that man had said—and time, the universal healer, had seen much of it restored.

"There goes an old coot," said Bart Kepler to his assistant, "within whose head revolves more important problems than those we encounter in the remaking of our world."

The assistant looked dubious. He was polishing a new gadget, a miniature of a proposed multi-bladed propeller, with which he hoped to advance aviation.

"He passed me a while ago," said Bart Kepler, "and hardly spoke. He didn't mean anything by it. I'll never forget what he said once. Man is a component part of Nature, and not a master of it. He is nurtured by an environment that is propitious

to his supremacy over other creatures.

"I've been thinking too, and it looks a bit different now. Did you ever hear of the 'balance of Nature'? For instance, if the jack-rabbits get too numerous in the country, as they used to do, the coyotes would appear and trim down the surplus. Last year the pigeons became so plentiful that they promised to be the ruination of our crops. Aside from those we killed to eat, there were the chicken hawks, suddenly appearing on the horizon; where or how they survived the days after the comet is a mystery. Maybe in some cave, or hole in the ground. Anyway, the chicken hawks came, and the pigeons ceased to multiply. That's what is meant by the 'balance of Nature.' When those animals became too numerous, a natural law interposed and diminished them. Somehow mankind doesn't get used to applying the natural laws to human beings. Man gets to feeling that he is a master."

"Yeah, that's right," lied the assistant, who agreed with everything to keep from wavering in his engrossing study. "Bart, with this I think we can bring aviation to where it was, before the comet came. We can even take it ahead. Someday, man will conquer space! I mean it, Bart. I'm not kidding," he ended, for Bart was scowling savagely.

"Listen, kid!" he exhorted, picking up a hammer. His eyes fell upon a goldfish bowl, which had been placed on a stand in the hangar by his wife, who considered it an ornament. Bart strode over to the bowl and peered in. There swam a glorious triple-tailed goldfish with gold, black and red markings.

"There! That's what man is. A

fancy goldfish! Smug, and proud, and beautiful in his mastery of—a goldfish bowl!" He fairly snorted the words with contempt. "Until—" he emphasized — "until someone cracks the bowl—with a hammer."

The assistant was apparently apprehensive, but lost interest when Bart lay the hammer aside.

"Man is a goldfish," reiterated Bart. "A fancy goldfish. If you don't believe so, ask my wife."

A buxom woman with ruddy, tangled hair came down from a house almost hidden in the orchard.

"You ought to know, Bart," she said jealously. "I think it was that scientist's daughter, Eora, who told you."

"Now, darling," he expostulated. "Don't start that again. Eora and I simply weren't suited for each other. We were under a strain, but I couldn't live up to her customary life of luxury, and she couldn't live down to an ordinary flying man, and be

happy—in an ordinary world. We didn't quarrel necessarily — but things like that just work out. Besides, every man doesn't get a prize like you, Hon."

HEE SLAPPED her generous hips despite her protest. She seemed about to make further comment, but was interrupted by a tow-headed lad, barely able to toddle, who had been left to play on the porch of the house and had discovered her absence. With lugubrious lamentations, he came across the field after her. She threatened to spank him, hurried forward, picked him up, kissed and cuddled him into silence.

"Oh well, what the heck!" declared Bart, slapping his assistant's shoulders. "If you can forget your do-hickey, come on up to the house and sample the wife's apple dumpling pie. Before I met her I thought it was a lost art."

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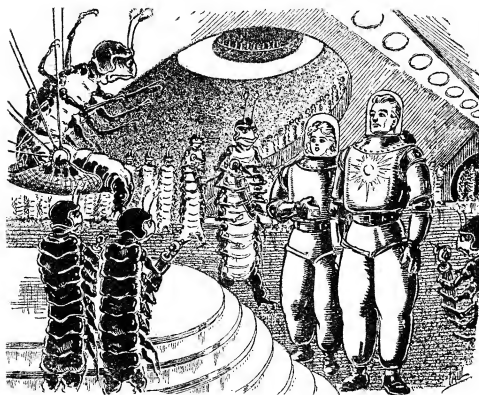
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OCTOBER ISSUE NOW ON SALE

MYSTERY FROM THE STARS

by JOHN COLERIDGE

Lieutenant Ted Pitman of the Ether Patrol discovers a queer-looking asteroid in the depths of space—one that turns out to be a mile-long ship from a distant star, carrying a message of menace!



"Go now!" commanded the alien. "Tell your people to leave Earth, or we will drive them away!"

LIEUTENANT Ted Pitman, of the Ether Patrol, rocketed his small ship gracefully around the large liner which hurtled on its scheduled run toward Mars. Every eight hours he made this rou-

tine maneuver, on his assignment as the big vessel's watchdog. In between times, he parked the one-man ship in the liner's hold and joined in the passengers' social activities. But he was ready for trouble at a mo-

ment's notice. Pirate depredations in space had not been entirely eliminated in 2139.

He turned to the girl who was with him in the cramped confines of the cabin. It was really against regulations to have a passenger along, particularly a woman, but he felt the exception was justified.

"Like it?" he asked, shooting the ship into a swift, birdlike arc.

"It's thrilling!" agreed the girl, holding to the handrail firmly.

Pitman wouldn't have known how to describe Mayella Harkness to some one else, except to say that she was the most attractive and lovely girl on ten worlds. She approached that ultimate, with her fine, white complexion, pert nose, auburn tresses. But there was a certain haunted stare in the back of her long-lashed blue eyes. Pitman had often wondered why.

He stopped the ship and let it drift beside the great liner. Their mutual coasting velocity, since powered acceleration had been discontinued, was close to fifty miles a second, relative to Earth—but they seemed to be hanging motionlessly among the stars.

Pitman looked into the girl's eyes. His voice was nervous, but he spoke decisively.

"I've known you a week, Mayella, aboard the liner. We've talked, eaten, and danced together. It's been great. And now I—I want you to marry me!"

The girl gasped.

"Don't worry, I'm ready to settle down," he went on quickly. "I'll retire from the Patrol. I've had my whirl of excitement in it, for ten years, since I enlisted at eighteen. I've been studying rocket mechanics on the side. They'll transfer me to the docks, on Earth, on repair

service. We can make a home there!"

He stopped, waiting for an answer. He had planned this, almost from the first moment he had laid eyes on her, when the liner had embarked from Earth. Mayella Harkness stared at him wide-eyed for a moment, as though he had said something incomprehensible. Then she dropped her eyes.

"No, Ted," she whispered. "I'm sorry—but I can't!"

"There's someone else?" he asked quietly, crushed.

"No!"

"Then you don't—"

"I—I do! But I can't marry you, Ted. I just—can't!"

The haunted look that he had seen before was in her eyes again, stronger now. She turned away suddenly, quietly sobbing. Pitman put his arm around her shoulder. "There's something bothering you, that you haven't told me. What—"

HE BROKE off. A flare of rockets appeared among the stars behind, and a ship quickly overhauled the big liner. It glinted in the sunlight from the side. Its hull was brightly crimson.

"The Red Pirate!" grunted Pitman. "I've been waiting to meet up with him!"

This particular red-hulled pirate ship had been bothersome in the spaceways from Mercury to Pluto. For two years it had plundered a variety of ships and cargoes. At times it had battled it out with Patrol ships, always winning. There was a strange rumor that the red ship had some devastating weapon against which no ship could stand.

The pirate craft maneuvered around the curve of the liner's hull and poised vulturally. Pitman pushed the girl into the corner and

threw himself forward. He reflected that it was a poor time to have a woman aboard. Lying at full length on his stomach, he was in the best position to manipulate his gun and ship controls. The one-man patrol ships were designed for speed, efficiency, and offered the least possible target to an enemy. In beam width, they were little more than five feet.

Then, suddenly, the pirate ship acted. From thin, slitted spouts along its smooth surface something spat forth toward the liner. It seemed to be a ray that bit viciously into the engine compartment, shearing through metal as though it were paper. Pitman gasped. A ray like that had never been known before! He had never quite believed the stories about it. In a few minutes, the engine section would be completely cut away and the liner would be without power! No lives would be lost, since the rest of the ship would be sealed off, but the stranded occupants would have to wait for rescue perhaps a full day. In the meantime, the pirates could plunder the ship at their leisure.

An admirable system, Pitman reflected with rage. He had brought his ship nose on within a hundred yards of the pirate ship. Apparently they hadn't noticed him at all. One good shot and he could put the enemy out of commission—particularly a shot through one of the port plates, which were always the most vulnerable part of a space-ship.

He took a careful bead with the gun whose barrel and firing chamber were outside, just in front of his conning port. His sights lined with deadly accuracy on the nose port of the pirate ship.

"Ted! No—"

Just as he pulled the trigger, the girl clutched at his arm, spoiling his

hairline aim. At the jerk of the trigger, a soundless projectile had leaped for the opposing ship. The recoil to the free-floating ship was taken up by the automatic blasts of the rear rockets.

The shell struck the pirate craft and there was a brilliant, silent explosion that for a moment hid the whole ship. Smoke puffed into the nothingness of space. Then the view cleared and Pitman saw that the high-powered shell had done little damage, striking at a glancing angle.

"What's wrong with you?" he hissed furiously at the girl. "I'd have got them if you hadn't interfered!"

"But, Ted, I didn't want—"

"It's them or us, you little fool!" he grated. "No room for sentiment in this game!" Bitterly he reflected that he should never have disobeyed regulations and taken the girl aboard. She was becoming hysterical.

There was only one thing to do now, with the element of surprise over, and Pitman did it. He jerked as his controls with his left hand and fired the gun with his right. The little ship darted forward, pumping its deadly cargo at the enemy, in a desperate attack. But it would not be so easy now.

A second after the first shell thundered against its hull, the pirate ship had taken alarm and maneuvered. It was a moving target now, constantly changing its angle of velocity—and they were undoubtedly lining up their guns on him.

Pitman bored in, firing steadily, hoping to get in a lucky shot before they swung their amazing ray on him. His fate, and that of Mayella, hung in the balance as their little ship, spitting fire, rushed forward like an angry cat. Most of his shells

went wild, on into open space. The few that struck did little more than dent the heavy armor-plate. If Pitman could pound away at one certain spot long enough, he might crack through, but there was no chance for such concentrated aim.

He had forgotten the girl, in the grimness of the moment, but now she suddenly tugged and shrieked at him again. He tried to shake her off, but she seemed to have gone berserk.

"Mayella, have you gone mad?" he groaned. "They'll get us in a second. Why are you—"

"Please, Ted! Stop—"

Unable to fight the enemy and the girl both, Pitman was forced to retreat. He jerked savagely at the rocket studs and spun the ship around in a wide circle, away from the Red Pirate. He expected quick death in retaliation for his attack, at any instant, but somehow it didn't come.

"Mayella!" he gasped. "I don't understand—" The girl's behavior had completely baffled him. "You've been fighting their battle for them, against me!"

The girl started to say something, then broke off, pointing. A signal rocket flared from the nose of the pirate ship, requesting radio contact.

"Connect with them!" she said, gasping in relief. It was a moment of truce.

A STONISHED at the pirate's act, Pitman switched on his radio, tuning for the general communications band. "Lieutenant Ted Pitman, of the Ether Patrol!" he barked into his mike.

A voice came back instantly, surprisingly cultured in tone, and hardly what Pitman had expected from an outlaw of space.

"I presume you have recognized me as the Red Pirate, Lieutenant," spoke the other in a smooth, unruffled voice, as though nothing had happened. "It is my custom, whenever I come at odds with one of the Patrol, to offer them escape! You realize your disadvantage now, I hope, Lieutenant. I could have destroyed you in the last few moments. My weapon, which you have seen in operation on the liner, could slice you as one slices bread. You have your choice, Lieutenant—leaving or dying!"

"The Patrol never leaves!" grated back Pitman.

"The answer I've invariably heard!" retorted the pirate chief. "Brave, foolish men! Well, Lieutenant, you've signed your own death warrant." The voice became sharp. "Prepare for battle—"

"No!"

Mayella had thrust herself forward, before the microphone. "Father!" she exclaimed. "I'm aboard Lieutenant Pitman's ship. Your daughter—Mayella!"

Pitman stared at her dumfoundedly. The revelation, while it explained her actions, sent his thoughts whirling. This girl, whom he loved, was the daughter of the most notorious pirate of the time! It was almost too incredible to believe.

A startled gasp had come from the radio speaker. For a moment the pirate chief seemed to have lost his voice. Then he spoke, half to himself: "Mayella—my daughter! I'd almost forgotten I had one!" His voice rose. "But how did you know, or find out—"

"Mother told me everything before she died—a month ago," answered Mayella softly.

Harsh breathing came from the radio. "Died—" The man's voice

was tortured, broken. "I wish I had seen her, once more. And you, Mayella, my child! But you wouldn't want to see me. I'm an outlaw, an enemy of society!"

"I do want to see you!" said the girl quickly. "I've been hoping somehow to meet you. Father, you must give up what you're doing. You can't go on that way. You must come back to live a normal life. You must!"

The man's soul was being torn to quivering shreds—but abruptly his voice became hard, inflexible.

"No!" he half shouted. "My so-called debt to society could only be paid by—my death! And society owes me a debt! I haven't been plundering the spaceways for wealth, though my followers do. I've been extracting—revenge! I haven't taken lives ruthlessly. I've just been proving that if society doesn't want me as a friend, it must have me as an enemy!"

The harsh tones died to a whisper. "Goodbye, Mayella. Forget I'm your father. Live your own life. If I've brought you unhappiness, forgive me!"

The radio clicked, breaking the contact. The pirate ship hung for a moment, as though contemplating the liner, then scuttled away with flaming rockets. The red ship became a star, then dissolved into the black curtain of the void.

PITMAN broke from a trance, reaching for the engine studs. His duty, as a Patrol officer, was to follow the pirate relentlessly. He dropped his hands, groaning a little. What could duty mean, in a situation like this? The girl was sobbing heartbrokenly. Clumsily, he tried to comfort her.

"Tell me the whole story," he sug-

gested. "Is your father—Dr. Andrew Harkness?"

He had suddenly connected her name with the eminent scientist of five years before, a chemical expert for the army department in the Earth government. He had stolen, so the scandal went, important data on a mysterious new compound, apparently with the idea of developing it himself.

Mayella Harkness nodded, conquering her weeping fit. "I know what you're thinking," she blazed. Fire darted from her eyes. "But it isn't true! Another man, a private scientist, stole the data for the new substance, while father was on duty. He later died in his laboratory, destroyed by some unknown force. My father went to—prison! For three years!"

Her face burned with red shame. "When he got out, no one wanted him, because of the stigma. The government banned him as a scientist. Private industry scorned him. His genius was going to waste. Oh, it was so hard, and cruel!"

For a moment she held her face in her hands, choking back sobs. "Father became terribly embittered. He couldn't face his friends. One day he—disappeared. My mother told me he had gone to Mars and died there in an accident. But she knew what he had done—drifted into bad company, and eventually piracy. She told me when she died." The girl's voice became shrill. "But can you blame him? An innocent man—his career ruined—now you know what he meant about revenge!"

"In a way, I can't blame him," admitted Pitman. "But he made matters worse by turning to piracy. Perhaps, in a few years, he might have lived down the prison sentence. Now there's no hope for him. And he

should have thought of you—"

"He thought I'd never know, but I do." The girl was looking at him now, with that haunted look. "And now you realize, Ted, why I couldn't marry you, or any other man. Not with the thought of my father roaming through the spaceways, plundering, an enemy to society—"

"On the contrary, you are going to marry me! You heard what your father said himself—live your own life!" His hands moved for the controls. "In fact, we're going to Earth right now and be married!"

"No, Ted—"

He turned to grab her, kissed her fiercely, though she tried to struggle out of his arms. Then he released her and called the liner's captain by radio. Assured that all was well except for the ruined engines, Pitman announced his immediate departure for Earth. Another Patrol ship, contacted by the captain, would arrive in a few hours. Later the rescue ships would come from Mars.

Pitman rammed power into his rear rockets, plotting a course for Earth. The girl watched silently.

"Ted, I won't do it!" she insisted in a low voice, her lips firm.

Pitman said nothing, smiling. He would have a week in which to talk her out of her determined attitude. He could do it. But he was not so sure, as he once again saw the haunted look in her eyes.

TWO days later the little Patrol ship was still arrowing at a steady high velocity for Earth. Within it, the man and girl sat silently opposite each other, the latter's eyes red-rimmed from weeping. Pitman's nerves were ragged. It had gradually become apparent to him that the girl meant what she said.

"You win," he sighed dismally,

breaking a silence of hours. "But at least," he pleaded, "go back to Earth and live there."

"No—Mars," said the girl tonelessly. "Away from relatives and friends. I'll work in the radium plant; I have an offer from them."

Pitman turned wearily and drummed the nose rockets into their course. Ten hours later the ship had reversed its direction, relative to Earth, and was building up velocity toward Mars again.

Suddenly the clang of the meteor-mass reflection-beam sounded, warning of a sizable meteor directly in their path. Pitman, though dozing, reacted instantaneously, twisting the ship off its straight course with off-thrust rocket charges. Ten seconds later they flashed over a dark bulk by a safe margin.

"Close call!" Pitman breathed.

He abruptly applied deceleration. "Queer thing," he murmured, "but that object looked symmetrical to me. I'll have to take another look at it." He was prompted by his Patrol training, which was to investigate everything out of the ordinary in space.

"Look, it's a ship!" he stated as they came in view of it again. "Is it stranded or—" His eyes were suddenly bulging. "Lord, how big is that ship!"

Hovering over it, the mysterious ship revealed unbelievable dimensions. It loomed between them and the background of stars like a finned monster, long and torpedo-shaped. It was bigger, far bigger, than any ocean liner, zeppelin, or space-freighter ever built. Pitman found himself saying that no known shipyard on Earth, Venus, Mars or Gany-mede was capable of turning out such a giant craft. But he didn't believe his trained senses when they told

him the ship could not be less than a mile in length!

A mile! It could stow the great ore-freighters in its hold as though they were toys! What incredible mystery lay before their eyes?

Mayella came out of her dull apathy enough to ask, "What is it, Ted?"

"I don't know!" he replied truthfully. He was still looking it over. It was astounding in other ways besides its size. It had no rocket tubes for propulsion, as far as he could see. Nor port plates. Its hull was one continuous, smooth sheet, like a metal egg. No sign of life was apparent from the outside.

"But it must be a ship of some sort," reasoned Pitman. "I'll signal it." He shot a bright magnesium signal flare over the ship's nose. Into his radio he barked: "Ship ahoy! Ether Patrol calling. Answer immediately!"

But no acknowledgment came from the mystery craft, even after Pitman had shot a dozen signal rockets. Growling, he lined the sights of his gun.

"I'll wake them up!" He sent a shell glancing off the hull. He knew its vibrations would clang through the interior of the ship like a thousand bells.

Still no answer—not the tiniest whisper—from the strange vessel!

"What are you going to do?" queried the girl, seeing the sudden grim set of his jaw.

"Any ship," fumed Pitman, "no matter where in the Solar System, that doesn't answer either by radio, light-signals, or rockets, is subject to attack! We'll see if a nice little hole in their hull doesn't do the trick!"

Savagely, he lined up his gun squarely for the broad side of the

ship, and fired. A fountain of flame cascaded from the explosion. Pitman's lungs gave an astonished gasp.

The hull was undamaged where his high-powered shell had struck. Not the slightest dent was apparent!

Cursing, dumfounded, Pitman sent shell after shell pounding at the adamant metal, but each had as little effect as the first. That hull simply could not be penetrated, not even scratched. Nor did the occupants of the ship show any sign of awareness of the bombardment, though the noise must be deafening within!

"This is the craziest mystery I ever ran across!" Pitman muttered, baffled.

"Where can the ship be from?" asked Mayella.

Pitman shook his head and tuned his transmitter to the Patrol's wave-band. "Emergency report!" he said tensely. "Unknown ship of gigantic proportions refuses to make contact!" He went on to give the details and its spatial position, in accordance with his charts. "Suggest navy ships be sent," he concluded, "in the event of hostilities. Report by Lieutenant Ted Pitman, EP-45X-3." Then he waited for an answer, staring at the meteor-sized ship.

Suddenly, for the first time, it gave an indication of being other than a mass of metal. It moved! Slowly, smoothly, it began to glide through space, toward Earth! With an exclamation, Pitman rocketed his ship to follow.

"Guess I can't take you to Mars," he said briefly to the girl. "I'm on duty now. I'll have to keep this ship in sight and report its new position."

But soon the huge ship gathered speed at a rate that threatened to leave them behind. Without hesitation, Pitman did the one thing left—turned toward the ship and drew

closer. It was like landing on a broad, smooth metal plateau. He let out magnetic grapples that held the tiny Patrol ship fast.

The metal goliath, accelerating at an incredible rate, slid smoothly toward Earth. The Patrol ship clung to its side like a flea on some beast of the void.

"I wish I knew what this is all about!" growled Pitman. He glanced at the girl. "I'm sorry you're in this, Mayella."

She smiled wanly. "I'm glad," she said simply, "it's with you rather than anyone else."

HOURS later the great ship decelerated to a stop. Earth was considerably nearer now. It displayed a disk and near it was the bright dot of the Moon. Pitman contacted his headquarters and reported the new position. A fleet had already embarked and would soon arrive. The Ether Patrol was prompt in keeping the space lanes under rigid supervision.

Pitman's heart leaped when the fleet blinked into view, like a group of fireflies. He counted a dozen ships. Four of them were thirty-man warships, bristling with guns.

"Now let these chaps try to ignore signals!" said Pitman grimly. "Those warships have guns that will blast down a range of mountains!"

The commander of the fleet, after a brief contact with Pitman, sent signal rockets across the mystery craft's nose. He evidently went through the same stages of rage and bafflement Pitman had, for soon shells began to hammer against the hull. Pitman could feel the concussion through the hull of his own ship, touching the other's hull. Then, all else failing, the bigger warships let fly with their heavy shells. Pitman

waited breathlessly to see the result.

Each would have been sufficient to tear any normal ship in half, penetrating the toughest armor-plate known. But the effect on the giant ship's hull was absolutely nil! Infra-beams were then brought into play, pouring a hell of heat down on the great hull. The metal failed even to glow!

Pitman gasped incredulously. Was the substance impenetrable to all the known forces? So it seemed.

The fleet began circling now, raining down its ineffective destruction, seeking a vital spot. But there seemed no vital spot in the uniform, unbroken surface of the Gargantuan ship. Explosive shells and infra-rays alike were unable to knock an atom loose.

Pitman's mind whirled. Who were the people within the ship, so secure against attack? What was their purpose? Did they have any offensive armament?

As though in answer to his mental query, retaliation struck. Not a hundred yards away, a circular patch of the hull suddenly began to glow with a violet color. Electrical forces gathered and abruptly shot forth in a blinding streak. The superlightning impinged on one of the warships. For one second sparks shot from its hull. The next second it was gone, and a puff of gray dust expanded into the void. The Patrol warship had been annihilated to the last atom!

Pitman groaned in dismay as he saw the deadly force spring to each of the fleet in turn, utterly destroying them. The last ship turned tail, but futilely. The lightning force stabbed out to it—and the Patrol fleet was gone!

Blindly, obeying instinct rather than reason, Pitman sent his ship away from the hull, with little hope

that he would escape the universal destruction. Mayella was moaning hysterically at the awful sight they had just witnessed. What terrible menace did the great ship spell?

And then, down below, a hole yawned in the great hull. An artificial hole, opened by the occupants. Some force stabbed upward, gripped the little Patrol ship, and drew it down. Gasping, Pitman turned on the full power of his rockets to get away, but the weird force was the stronger. His ship was pulled into the opening and deposited with a bump within a large, round chamber. Overhead, sliding panels came together, to seal off escape.

Pitman drew a breath. "It looks as though we're going to meet the ship's crew." Mayella crept into his arms, trembling.

In a moment, a door opened in the wall nearest them. Pitman was not too shocked to see an alien being step in. The ship had been alien from the start.

The creature was tall and thin, and most nearly resembled a centipede with eight pairs of arms running down its sides. It stood upright on a pair of short, sturdy limbs. Perhaps, in its earlier evolution it had run on all its limbs, but now it stood erect and the upper limbs had evolved into arms. The head was queerly human, but hairless and without ears.

MAYELLA shuddered against Pitman. It was not a pretty looking thing, but obviously intelligent. With sixteen supple hands supplied by Nature to serve its brain, it could hardly fail to have achieved intelligence. Sixteen hands, where humans had only two—did the ratio carry through in their respective degrees of civilization? And science?

The being beckoned to them with four of its sixteen arms, to come out. "Guess we'll have to," Pitman shrugged. "Evidently they don't mean us any immediate harm. Here—space suits. They probably breathe different air."

They donned the sealed suits, hooking oxygen bottles to their belts, and stepped from their ship.

"Do you speak our language?" asked Pitman, his suit's audio-unit rendering his voice beyond.

The creature gave no sign of having heard. Lacking ear organs, it obviously didn't know the meaning of sound. Pitman saw now why they had been so slow in detecting the presence of Earth ships before. The sounds of the battering shells on their hull had meant nothing to them.

But the being gave an answer to Pitman's question anyway. "I do not know what you mean by 'speak.' We use the universal language of telepathy." And the two Earth people, staring at each other in surprise, realized they had "heard" the message in their minds, by telepathic impulses! The aliens' evolution, denying them the sense of sound, had instead sharpened their psychic sense.

"You will disarm yourself," continued the being. "You have two weapons in your belt!"

Pitman saw now that the alien held three shiny weapons in three of its hands, covering them at all angles. For an instant, he thought of trying to shoot the alien down, but what good would that do? There was still no way to get out of the ship. They were more or less at the mercy of these beings. Pitman quietly removed his pistols and tossed them on the floor.

"Come!" The creature led them through the door and down a broad corridor. Pitman wondered how

many other corridors there were in this tremendous ship. At one place on the wall he saw a schematic diagram, evidently of the ship. It was a maze so intricate that even its denizens needed such a reference!

The corridor opened out into a large room in which were gathered several dozens of the centipede people. Their cold, unblinking eyes looked the prisoners over frostily. Mayella shivered and pressed her space-suited body as close to Pittman's as possible. He gripped her gloved hand reassuringly,

They were conducted before a centipede-being half reclining with sinuous grace on a web-like frame. This one, apparently highest in authority, stared at them for a long minute, till the two were nervous.

"You people have evidently been trying to get in touch with us," he finally telepathed, clearly. "You have even—in your conception—attacked us, though it did no harm."

"From where are you?" asked Pitman aloud, knowing his thoughts would carry as well. "What is your purpose here?"

"We are from another star system," informed the alien. "It is about nine light-years away." Pitman thought of Sirius and the creature promptly added: "Sirius, you call it. We have existed there as a civilized race for a million of your years. We have recently decided to send out ships to search for possible colony sites among the nearer stars. Those back in our world will be glad to hear of this solar system. After landing and setting up a sealed, impregnable headquarters on Earth, we will send the ship back to bring more of our people. It will be the van of a fleet. Unfortunately, of course, as we expand, you Earth people will be eliminated!"

Pitman and the girl looked at each other in horror at the cold-blooded tone of the alien. There would be no such thing as mercy extended.

"It is the rule of all life," resumed the centipede-being. "The inferior must give way to the superior. You have seen how impregnable we are. The hull surrounding us is composed of solidly packed neutrons. It is a substance so dense that your explosives are like puffs of a breeze against it. Our lightning weapon produces a stream of electrons traveling at the speed of light. We nullify gravity, in running this ship. Power we extract from shattered atoms. Our science is far superior to yours!"

Pitman didn't try to deny that. He stood numbly, in the realization of this ruthless invasion from another star.

"Go now!" commanded the alien, waving six of his many arms peremptorily. "Tell your people to leave Earth, or we will drive them away. Later, we will want all the planets, but at present just Earth. It is the most suited to our purpose, as we have observed after cruising through all the Solar System. Go!"

A spark of anger flamed within Ted Pitman, at the alien's smug assurance. "You won't find it so easy to take over Earth!" He roared. "You're biting off a bigger piece than you can chew!"

"We will defeat all your ships!" prophesied the leader of the Sirians.

THEIR former guide led them back to their ship. He even allowed Pitman to pick up his two weapons, still on the floor. In the cabin, they doffed their sealed suits. When the trapdoor overhead opened, Pitman sent his little ship scudding out.

They were free! It all seemed like

a fantastic dream. They had been captured by alien beings from the star Sirius, told of a doomful fate for Earth's civilization, and then tamely released.

Pitman growled. "They want us to tell our people to give up before the battle is even begun!" he muttered. "They want Earth turned over to them without a struggle, to be overrun with their hordes!"

"Ted, is it all possible?" whispered Mayella Harkness, eyes dazed. "Beings from another star? Invasion of the Solar System? It's all so unreal!"

"I'm afraid it's bare fact," returned Pitman soberly. "It's not so incredible. More than half the stars are known to be binaries, like Sirius. They are likely to have planets, because of gravitational stresses between two close stars. Evolution must have produced rational life-forms in many of the systems. Scientists admitted that. Some even predicted visitations, eventually, of beings from other stars. In fact, it happened once. A strange conical ship landed on Titan, Saturn's moon, ten years ago, bearing queer creatures never known in our system. But they were dead, evidently from the hardships of a long journey between the stars. These Sirians seem to have solved the problem of interstellar travel."

"In a ship that can't be destroyed!" murmured the girl defeat-
edly.

"They must be destroyed!" hissed Pitman. "Otherwise they'll send the message back for more of their ships to follow!"

He was already barking into his radio. "Lieutenant Ted Pitman reporting. Grave emergency! Giant ship from Sirus. Threatens invasion of Earth! First Patrol fleet annihilated! Crisis facing Solar System!"

He knew that he couldn't make the report too strong. When headquarters contacted him, he went on to give the full details, crushing their initial skepticism by his sheer earnestness. Besides, they had to believe. The last Patrol ship, before being destroyed, had managed to send out a tragic message about the wholesale destruction.

"What do you think we're up against, Lieutenant?" asked Admiral John Harmon, commander-in-chief of all the Ether Patrol. "How many ships do we need?"

"Every ship we have in the Solar System!" snapped Pitman. "Fully armed and ready for the toughest battle in all history! Good lord, sir, this is no time to hesitate or quibble! Send all you can. The enemy has only one ship, but there isn't a dent on its hull from the first fleet's bombardments! You must believe me, sir!"

"I'm beginning to," retorted the admiral. "I'm sending out full space mobilization orders. Stand by there and report any new positions the enemy ship may take."

"Right, sir!"

Mayella looked into Pitman's eyes as he turned from the radio. "What if all our ships, all our armament," she said in a low, tense voice, "were unable to harm the Sirian ship?"

Pitman didn't answer, but there was a worried stare in his eyes. He looked at the girl, smiling a little. "A short while ago we were so concerned about—ourselves. Now it seems so petty, in the face of this. Doesn't your attitude seem foolish, now, Mayella?"

Her eyes clouded. "No, Ted. Regardless of this other thing, or however it turns out, I couldn't marry you!"

Pitman reflected in bafflement that the greatest mystery of the universe

had always been, and always would be, a woman's mind.

FOR two days they hovered, in their little ship. The metal Cyclops they were watching made no move. It seemed to be waiting patiently, ominously. Pitman eyed his gauges apprehensively. His small stores of oxygen, food and water were rapidly vanishing. But the fleet should arrive soon, or some part of it.

Finally it appeared, a vast swarm of rocket lights that danced among the stars. Not since the days of the great interplanetary wars had such an armada been amassed. The main body halted a mile away from the brooding bulk of the Sirian ship. When several small ships came forward, Pitman rocketed to meet them.

"We'll try signaling," informed the commanding officer, by radio, after a short conversation.

"You won't get an answer," stated Pitman.

Convinced of that after a succession of radio signals, rocket flares and small shells against the hull, the officer barked: "Retreat to a safe distance, Lieutenant. This means battle!"

Pitman swung his ship away, halting at a half-mile. "We'll watch!" he said tensely to the girl. Instinctively, she crept within the protection of his arms. A world's fate, perhaps, rested on the outcome.

The Earth fleet moved up in formation, small ships in the lead, dreadnaughts behind. All the cosmos seemed to hold its breath. Then hell broke loose—

Raking shell-fire swept over the enigmatic ship from another star. Its great, broad hull sparkled with rapid flashes. The airlessness of space muffled all sound. It was like a

silent movie reel. The first contingent swept by in a curving arc. As Pitman expected, the alien ship's hull was mockingly undamaged.

The second contingent let loose a barrage of liquid fire. The thermite fire, developed for spatial use, had been used at times to burn away large meteors in the ship lanes. It licked futilely at the neutronic hull of the enemy, which showed not the slightest pitting!

By now, Pitman knew, the fleet commander must be awe-struck at this vessel whose outer skin was so adamant.

The third phalanx hurled infra-beams at the target, at such close quarters that one ship's nose melted away from the reflected heat. This deadly surge of energy from disintegrated atoms had no more effect on the Sirian ship's hull than a candle-flame.

The next line of ships drifted up and from hard, plastic nozzles they sprayed forth thin, biting streams of acid. Space warfare of previous times had developed this weapon, to weaken heavy armor-plate for shell-fire to work through. The powerful corrosive, anathema to all metals and alloys, bubbled and hissed violently against the enemy ship's hull, but when it had evaporated, not a line had been etched into the smooth, shiny surface!

Desperate shell-fire was begun again. In the last analysis, this weapon counted the most in space, where one tiny hole in a ship's hull most often put it out of commission, at least temporarily. Battleships of successively greater size, crew, and armament rocketed up, to pour their shells against the mile-long hull that had so impossibly withstood all previous forces. The explosions against the target grew to tremendous foun-

tains of flame and disruptive matter.

The alien ship did not even budge the slightest from the titanic shocks. It seemed rigidly locked into space, totally unaffected by forces that would have reduced an Earthly city to smoking ruins. And it hadn't as yet made one attempt at retaliation.

Soon the last row of ships remained to try their guns. These were the superdreadnaughts, each as large as an ocean-going capital battleship, manned by a crew of a thousand. Their long, wicked gun-barrels stabbed from the hull like giant spikes.

"The last hope!" whispered Pitman, moving his ship back a ways. "If they fail—"

The mighty dreadnaughts, lining up, delivered one concentrated broadside. The alien ship's surface was totally obscured by the resulting melee of frightful detonations. Even a large asteroid would have cracked in half from that salvo, but the ship of the invading Sirians, when the gases had cleared, lay there as shiny and inconceivably undamaged as ever.

Pitman's exclamations were drowned out by the hail of bomb particles against his hull from the terrific bombardment. Mayella trembled against him. Earth's forces had failed! The ghastly fact lay clear that the alien ship could not be destroyed!

But the battle fleet of Earth did not give up. As one now, they plunged to the attack, from all sides, seeking a vulnerable spot. There was none in the unbroken surface against which they hurled all their armament.

And then the besieged ship retaliated, as though all the while it had been laughing at the attack, and had now grown tired of the game. Blinding bolts of superlightning shot from

its surface. Ship after ship of the Earth fleet exploded into atomic dust. It was carnage—slaughter!

Pitman watched, sickened to the roots of his being. It occurred to him now that the aliens had wanted him to call the attack. It was furthering their program. Soon the Solar System would lie defenseless to the invaders. Pitman signalled the flagship frantically. "Stop it! Stop it!" he yelled. "It's a senseless waste of lives and ships. Retreat! Something may be done against the aliens in the future, if we have some ships left!"

"Yes, I guess you're right," came back Admiral Harmon's voice, dully.

The bombardment ceased and the undestroyed half of the fleet scurried back. But now the giant Sirian craft leaped after them, with its Jovian lightning, bent on complete destruction of the fleet.

"Scatter! They must scatter—" groaned Pitman.

At the same moment, the fleet carried out this obvious maneuver, ships scooting away in all directions. The Sirian ship, like a monstrous bear, gave chase to a few and then finally stopped, unable to do anything about that.

Pitman stared at it. There it lay, the victor, the master of the Solar System, in one battle. The Sirians could go where they wished, do what they wanted. It was a forlorn hope that they could be defeated at any time in the future. Their sealed habitations on Earth would be impregnable too.

The handwriting was on the wall—mankind's doom!

IN A daze of futility, Pitman hovered near the great ship of menace. It barely occurred to him that his oxygen supply would not last another hour. The Earth fleet had re-

formed and limped back to Earth. It was even too late now to overhaul them. He stirred. He must send an SOS for one of the ships to return. The individual will to live could not be ignored, even in the face of what the alien ship represented.

As Pitman turned to the radio, its signal-buzz sounded—someone trying to contact him. He snapped the switch.

"Lieutenant Pitman?" came the deep, cultured voice. "This is Dr. Harkness—or the Red Pirate, as you know me. I picked up your previous reports, and came here. Is—is Mayella safe?"

"Yes, I am, father!" returned the girl with a glad cry.

They could see his ship now, outside the port, shining crimsonly by reflected sunlight. A sigh of relief came from the radio.

"Dr. Harkness, you'd better leave," said Pitman coldly. "I'm about to call a Patrol ship to rescue me, as I'm short of oxygen. If they see you—"

"No!" interrupted the former scientist quickly. "Don't call them. Come aboard my ship!"

"What?" gasped Pitman. "But I'm a Patrol officer, and you—"

"Yes, I know. I'm a pirate. But look out of your port, at that great, impregnable ship from another star. In the presence of that we're no longer Patrol officer and pirate chief. We're—fellow humans!"

"What do you mean?" Pitman queried wonderingly.

"Come to my ship. I'll explain. I promise you safe conduct."

"Ted, please!" murmured Mayella. "No matter what he's been, he'd never break his word."

"All right," agreed Pitman.

In space-suits, it was a simple matter for them to leap across to the red ship, after it had maneuvered close

inside the pirate ship, they removed their suits. Several hard-bitten men looked at Pitman stonily, but left the forecabin at a sign from their leader.

Dr. Harkness looked more the pirate than the scientist. He was unshaven, hard-eyed, slovenly clothed. At his waist were two pistols. But his eyes softened as he stared at his daughter. Suddenly she flew into his arms wordlessly. Both were moist-eyed when they broke apart.

He motioned them to seats. "I'll be brief," he spoke. "I came here not only to find out if Mayella was safe, but because of the—aliens. I believe I can defeat them! My weapon might do it!"

Pitman stared skeptically. "But no energy-ray can harm that hull if the fleet's big battery of infra-rays couldn't," he declared.

"My weapon isn't a ray," replied the ex-scientist. "It's a liquid that I spray out. And it's the universal solvent! I've tested it with everything, glass, stone, metal, clay, leather,—it eats through anything, almost instantly!"

"Then how do you keep it?" Pitman asked the poser that quite naturally came with the thought of the universal solvent.

"I don't. I produce it outside the ship. My weapon has two nozzles. One sprays out a liquid that is harmless itself, but when the radiation from the other nozzle impinges on it, its molecules rearrange chemically and it becomes the universal solvent. And I think even the Sirian's neutron-hull couldn't resist it!"

Pitman bounced to his feet. "We'll try it! Dr. Harkness, you'd be doing a great thing if it succeeded. You'd save the Solar System!"

The older man made a gesture of authority. "We must have our reward, though. For my men, full par-

don. They are all rich now, with hidden loot. Full pardon would be welcome to them. As for me, I want just a promise to be left free to go after we try the weapon. As you know, there is no pardon for pirate chiefs. Now radio the fleet and have them come back. If I penetrate the aliens' hull, they must still do the rest. Have Admiral Harmon grant the pardon to my men, and my exemption from arrest."

Filled with new hope, Pitman called the fleet and poured out the encouraging message. There was no fear that the aliens would take alarm. They knew nothing of sound and therefore had no such thing as radio.

SEVERAL hours later, the fleet hung motionlessly above the alien ship. As usual it lay enigmatic, mysterious, indifferent to the presence of the humans it would soon conquer.

The red pirate ship crept beside the vessel slowly. Suddenly from its nozzles on one side sprang thin pencils of liquid, traveling like a solid object in the airlessness of space. They impinged on the enemy ship's hull. Trickle of fluid cohered and ran over the strange metal.

Tense eyes watched in the cabin of the pirate ship. Hard eyes of men that hoped to be freed of the law's hounding—the eyes of two young people who represented the humanity that the aliens were bent on destroying, and the hollow eyes of a man who had conquered bitterness to join in the battle of the civilization that had ostracized him.

"Look—" Mayella dug her fingers into Pitman's arm. "The liquid is working through!"

And it was, though at first it had seemed to give the lie to its name.

Slowly, with far less efficacy than it ate through ordinary matter, the universal solvent pitted the adamant surface, dug deeper.

Harkness gave low commands in his inter-ship tube and the craft began a revolution around the stupendous alien hulk, spraying down its corrosive burden in moving lines that steadily gnawed inward.

Pitman's heart sang, but suddenly he jerked. "Look out!" he yelled. A portion of the hull suddenly glowed violet and the Sirians' lightning force leaped at them. But warned of this previously, Harkness jerked a rocket lever that catapulted the ship back, throwing them all against the wall. The lightning missed.

And now, at this signal, the Patrol fleet charged down, all weapons hammering away at the weakened portion of the hull. For a while it seemed they had again failed. Not even the biggest shells of the superdreadnaughts worked through. And the Sirian ship trembled and began arrowing away, evidently aware of its danger.

The fleet dogged it relentlessly, before its superior acceleration took effect, pouring down a withering, desperate barrage. Suddenly, one shell took effect. A portion of the hull, lined with the universal solvent's etchings, cracked slightly. A rain of shells followed. The crack became a gaping pit, and succeeding bombs plummeted within the Sirian ship.

It rocked crazily. Other parts of the hull weakened, cracked, and exposed the interior. Vengeful, accurate shell-fire poured into the breeches. The alien ship stopped accelerating, its engines damaged. It could not get away. The end was near.

Once past that adamant hull, the Earth ships worked with deadly effi-

ciency. Shells poured into the holes from all angles. The interior must be a shambles. For an hour the grim work went on, till it was inconceivable that any corner of the great ship even with its stupendous bulk, could be untouched.

Then the Sirian ship floated, a lifeless, debris-filled hulk and the menace of the invaders from another star was over. If others came, the forces of Earth would be prepared and would know how to fight them.

IN THE pirate ship, some time later, Pitman prepared to leave. He and Mayella began donning their space-suits. Harkness watched with shadowed eyes. He turned as the radio signal buzzed.

"For you, Lieutenant," he announced. "The admiral calling."

Pitman stepped before the instrument. The admiral's voice rang out loudly. "I have a message from the Earth Council, as follows: Dr. Andrew Harkness, for his momentous service to mankind in making possible the defeat of the aliens, is hereby granted full pardon for his former crimes. He will be reinstated in the science bureau. It is stricken from our records that he was ever a pirate chief!"

Dr. Harkness stood stunned. Mayella hugged him eagerly, her eyes shining.

Pitman dragged her away after a moment. "I'm here too," he reminded her. "And let's see you think up any other reason why you can't marry me!"

"I can't!" the girl confessed.

THE END

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The Disappearing Papers

by MILES J. BREUER

The Judge dismissed the case because of insufficient evidence—for Professor Bradley's secret retribution was beyond detection by the greatest criminologist!

“YOUR HONOR, and Gentlemen of the Jury: The plaintiff, the Honorable Mark Woodsdale, who is one of our most prominent American financiers, has established by reliable witnesses, that on the 3rd of March, he received from Professor Winston Bradley, physicist and discoverer in the field of volatile solids, a set of formulas and specifications for a solid automobile fuel, in return for a certified check for one hundred thousand dollars. The defendant acknowledges the receipt of the check. The formulas and specifications were contained on eleven sheets of legal-size bond paper, stapled together with a bill-of-sale yielding to the plaintiff all rights in the discovery, which promises to revolutionize the automobile-fuel industry.

“Briefly, it referred to a solid, highly volatile hydrocarbon of the naphthalene series, which could be shoved into a door in the side of an automobile fuel-tank, like a cake of ice into a refrigerator. There it could be volatilized and carried to the carburetor as a gas. Patent specifications for volatilization and for a special carburetor were included.

“It has been brought out that Mr. Woodsdale himself in the presence of three members of his office staff, locked the papers, folded flat and sealed and labeled in a manila envelope, into a separately locked com-

partment of the Investment Company's vaults, fifteen minutes after Professor Bradley had left the Company's office, and six weeks ago. Mr. Woodsdale was busy for nearly three weeks, and no one else thought of the automobile-fuel papers. People were constantly in the vault, but it has been proven that Mr. Woodsdale carries the only key to the specially locked compartment, and that no one else went near it during the interim. When Mr. Woodsdale's attention was called to it by a ticker memorandum on his desk, he went to the vault and unlocked the compartment. He had no more than picked up the envelope when he became alarmed, because it felt empty. Hurriedly opening it, he found that indeed it was. There was not a trace of the papers. The label on the envelope was the proper one, and it was in Mr. Woodsdale's own handwriting. The seal was intact. The gentlemen of the jury have examined the envelope and have seen that there are no tricks about it.

“The plaintiff offers no explanation for the disappearance of the papers. Skilled investigation has left it a complete mystery. But we have established that the defendant has a discovery, that he intended to sell it, that he did sell it in good faith, and was paid one hundred thousand dollars for it; and that he now refuses to furnish duplicates of the papers. We ask the Court for an order to the

defendant that he furnish a new set of formulas and specifications and a bill-of-sale for the discovery.

"An additional circumstance has been unearthed during the investigation on this case, which throws suspicion on the entire transaction, and confirms the plaintiff's feeling that he has been imposed upon. Fifteen years ago, Professor Bradley, as a student, held part-time employment in a chemical plant of which Mark Woodsdale was the manager. Young Bradley was earning his way through school and supporting an invalid mother. There was a dispute as to the proprietorship of an original chemical formula, and Bradley claimed that it was his discovery. He was summarily discharged for this impertinence. Subsequently, his mother died of privation incident on the ensuing poverty, and Bradley's schooling received a setback of several years. It would seem, therefore, that there is a basis for suspecting that Professor Bradley may have unfriendly feelings toward Mr. Woodsdale. How that might explain the disappearance of the papers, we do not presume to be able to say.

"Your Honor, the plaintiff rests."

"Your Honor, the defense, having already entered a general denial, also rests!"

Both the Judge and the jury were momentarily taken aback by the suddenness of the announcement that there would be no summing-up by the attorney for the defense. The Judge rapped his gavel for attention.

"Mr. Wigmore," the Judge said to Bradley's attorney, "the Court is grateful to you for your consideration in saving its time and energy and the taxpayers' money with what would have been vain effort."

The Judge turned silently through

a number of books and read here and there for a few minutes.

"I do not believe I can let this case come to the jury," he finally said, thoughtfully. "It impresses me that we are asking Professor Bradley to hand over plans and specifications of something which he may or may not have discovered. We only have hearsay evidence on the discovery. There has been no concrete evidence exhibited to this Court to show that he ever discovered any solid automobile fuel. The only basis on which the Court could possibly justify action would be the missing papers. Without these papers, the Court has no legal evidence that there is any discovery. Therefore, it is not in a position to demand from Professor Bradley formulas and specifications for one. The case is dismissed for lack of evidence!"

The Judge had to rap violently for order so that he might call the next case, because of the crowd's enjoyment of the discomfiture of a none-too-popular promoter, who had also doubtlessly trimmed many of its members.

THROUGH the turmoil that rose up in the court-room came a thing like a projectile out of a cannon. It was the figure of Spike O'Connell shooting from the press table to the counsel table and grabbing the arm of Professor Bradley. The reporter was about the same age as the Professor and this age was not a great one. Spike grabbed the Professor's arm like that of an old friend and was steering him out of the crowd and away through a back door.

"Now. The real truth!" Spike demanded when they were safely ensconced in a taxi. "Is that story true about Woodsdale having fired you and stolen an invention from you?"

Bradley shrugged his shoulders.

"Thank you, thank you," Spike chuckled. "Have you really discovered a solid automobile fuel?"

"I'm not talking," Bradley smiled.

"Were there really some plans, or papers, or what-not?" Spike smiled ingratiatingly.

"Oh yes, yes," the Professor said carelessly. "He gave me a check, didn't he. When Woodsdale gives a check—"

"Then what became of them?"

"How should I know?" The Professor was a good shoulder-shrugging.

"Well, what about telling just only little me? You know I wouldn't publish anything to hurt you. That's a promise. I'm nuts to know what happened. It looks spooky."

Eloquent silence came from the Professor, until the taxi drew up in front of his laboratory. He motioned the reporter inside. He opened a refrigerator and revealed a hoar-crusted inner door.

"I'll give you a hint," he said to the reporter. "You are welcome to whatever you can find out for yourself."

The reporter waited with eager expectancy. The Professor took out of the refrigerator an 8-by-10-inch photograph of himself.

"I refused to give you my picture last week, when you asked me for it. Do you want this for your paper?"

Spike grabbed it eagerly.

"But the missing papers. You said—"

"Your engraver's deadline comes in thirty minutes," the Professor said, looking at his watch. "If you want my picture in tomorrow's Star, you had better run."

"Thank you. Thank you." Spike suddenly decided that he really had a scoop—a photograph of the shrinking, retiring Professor Bradley, the first one ever published. Harder to get than hen's teeth. This picture would go with the story of the trial.

He sat perspiring in another taxi, on the way to town. The hot sun shone through the glass of the cab. He laid the photograph on the seat and mopped his face and neck. As he picked up the picture again, it seemed strangely thin and limp. When he had gotten it, it had stood up stiffly in his fingers. Now it draped over his hand like a piece of tissue-paper.

As he sat there and watched it, a corner grew faint and disappeared! It just melted away, leaving a rounded edge in its place. Then the photograph came in two where it lay across his hand, and a limp fragment dropped to his lap on each side. As he gazed dumfoundedly at these, within a space of five minutes, they melted into the thin air at the edges. The edges shrank toward the middle of the piece, till there was nothing left. The picture was gone! There was an odor in the air similar to that of moth-balls.

"Volatile solids!" Spike gasped.

THE END

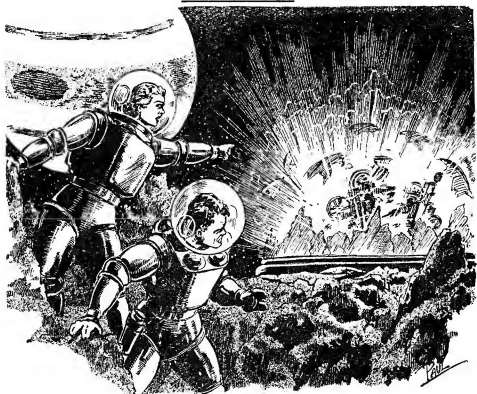
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FRIGID MOON

by DENNIS CLIVE

Fighting their way through a blizzard of frozen carbon dioxide, Smithy and Eva struggle against impossible odds to reach the one point on little Ganymede where there is chance of rescue—a weird battle between nightmare creatures spells life or death for the two Earth people!



Abruptly the distant dome of the station vanished in a blinding sheet of flame.

BARRY SMITHSON—"Smithy"—tossed restlessly on his light bed and finally sat up with a jerk, staring around him in the dull glow of the bedchamber safety lights. Stiffly he stuck out his arm and jabbed the switch that illumined the twenty cold light bulbs set diamond fashion in the glittering lanium ceiling.

He recognized the sound that had awakened him almost immediately—the release of the alarm bell by means of a greatly improved photoelectric device outside of this solitary Ganymedian refueling supply station.

For a moment, he sat trying to still his throbbing head. The lonely jitters had gotten into him again,

plunging his vitality to the lowest ebb and turning his mind to black despondency. Lonely jitters was the American slang term for the predominant disease of Ganymede, solitarius melancholia, supposedly a nervous reaction from continuous months of solo work in a viciously cruel climate and light gravity.

Grunting painfully, Smithy slid off the bed at last and reeled rather than walked across the shining expanse of floor, passed through the giant machine room wherein the silently working pumps extracted the raw mineral from Ganymede's depths for later pulverization and refinement into fuel for the giant liners on the Earth-Planet XII run, three worlds beyond Pluto. The Planetary Commission of 2316 had extended the known frontier of the Solar System enormously.

Stopping the alarm, Smithy lumbered across the great place, broad shoulders slouched, lank strings of black hair bobbing over his craggy face, furrowed with unbidden despair and melancholy. Tiredly, he ascended a rigid steel ladder and came up under the two-foot thick dome of viltex glass, looked at its arcing smoothness and tried to grin as he beheld the sight of blue vapor contracting and mushrooming on the exterior surface. So the Gasbrain had intercepted the cell-ray with his fantastic misty body and set the alarm going. . . .

"What's on your mind, Rope Trick?"

Smithy called the being that because of its magical ability to form its gaseous body into any desired representation of thought. Rope Trick, a true Gasbrain of Ganymede, composed entirely of carbon dioxide and oxygen under slightly heavier pressure than the surrounding at-

mosphere, represented the frigid satellite's highest form of life, far in advance of even Terrestrials, each one of his widely spaced molecules being an actual tiny brain working in conjunction with the neighboring molecules. He was easily able to catch and interpret the thoughts of the lonely Earthman under his shelter dome, but Smithy's brain was incapable of receiving thoughts back again.

Accordingly, Rope Trick did the next best thing and formed his astounding body into a series of pictures to represent his communication. Smithy watched him wearily, eyes adroop, as the Gasbrain caught the thought behind his words and began to writhe in the unimaginable cold of the Ganymedian night—minus 200° F.—cold because mighty Jupiter, though so near at hand, reflected little or no heat from his 35,000 miles of surface. Ganymede was no steaming jungle, as the first explorers had anticipated; it was a cruel, ruthless little world infinitely colder than the terrestrial Antarctic.

The shafting beams from the cold light bulbs revealed Rope Trick as a billowing cloud of blue against the intense dark of the Ganymedian night. As he stood watching, Smithy's eyes took on a new light. With magical speed, the gas transformed itself into the unmistakable outlines of a raniac space-suit, the only substance safe to use in an atmosphere where the minutest fraction of a spark would blow to atoms anything containing a bit of cotton with its gathered charges of unexpended static.

"Space-suit?" Smithy cried, impacting his thoughts simultaneously. "What do you mean? Want me outside?"

Rope Trick changed from a space-

suit into the outline of an Earthling, unmistakably that of a young woman with her eyes closed. . . . Smithy scowled with perplexity. Woman? Space-suit? What the hell—?

THE only women on Ganymede were those at the Settlement beyond the Mountains of Excelsior, the wives and daughters of the relay pilots who drove the huge space-liners on the savage tugging run past Jupiter's attraction field to the further planets. What in insanity was the Gasbrain driving at? No space-suited woman in her right senses would surely risk crossing the Excelsiors, especially with the Carbodox Blizzard season due at any time!

"Make it clearer!" Smithy bawled, his gray eyes brightening and his attack of jitters fading before this new interest. "What woman? Where? Use words, you feather-head! You know how!"

Receiving the thoughts, Rope Trick obeyed. He palpitated weirdly, then formed himself like a trick airplane exhaust advertisement. Smithy gazed in blank wonder at the misty message quivering on the dome.

"Earth woman twenty miles from Excelsiors. Senseless. Alone. If the zinrots see her, she's finished. Better come."

"Oke!" Smithy cried eagerly. "Thanks a lot, Ropy! I guess I don't know what I'd do without you to nose around outside."

Rope Trick telescoped into his normal hazy ball and left the glass. At top speed, Smithy clambered back down the ladder and raced across to the space-suit closet.

It was a matter of seconds to scramble into its roomy, automatically heated interior and spin the viltex helmet into place. Then slip-

ping his jet pistol on his belt, he moved through into the valve-chambers giving egress to the surface.

In ten minutes, he had passed through four chambers of successively lower temperature, and so out into the barren rocky landscape of the satellite itself. Immediately, Rope Trick whipped like a sapphire catherine wheel from the higher air and glowed by his side, writhing slowly through the poisonous atmosphere as he clumped along. . . . Odd indeed the understanding between these two—worlds apart in knowledge and formation, yet held together by the common unity of science.

Gaining the top of the little slope leading to the refueling station, Smithy paused for a moment. Ahead of him, stretching to the near horizon, was the empty plain, coal black under the terrible cold, marred only by pits and craters where the deadly zinrots, second highest form of Ganymedian life, had burrowed underground with their claw nails and scissor teeth.

Touching the eastern horizon loomed vast Jove, visibly turning slowly in the cloudless star- and moon-riddled sky. To the west stabbed the upper peaks of the Mountains of Excelsior, dominated by the Thunder Molar rearing to 3000 feet. Selby, the Earth explorer, had called it that because it had reminded him of the back tooth of mythical Jove, God of Thunder. . . .

These were familiar sights to Smithy as he started to plod on again, but he had the advantage of knowing that the Excelsiors were not really true mountains, but vast glaciers, flung to their great heights by Ganymede's slight gravity. Upon them rested the whole secret of the satellite's small colonization. By electrolyzing the water frozen into their

masses and adding to it an element with scant nitrogen content, both Settlement and refueling station—by underground pipes of lanium metal—possessed breathable atmosphere. Jong, the Martian engineer, was responsible for the miracle.

As Smithy clumped onwards, he adjusted the neutral shields in his boots from Earth-normal to Gany-normal. Immediately, his speed increased. Rope Trick twisted constantly in front of him, directing the way.

Ever and again, Smithy sailed clean over the zin-pits, finally covering nearly three miles—then suddenly the Gasbrain veered off to one side. Smithy promptly followed him and quite abruptly came upon a prone figure in the jovelight.

The bright rays slanted through the viltex helmet onto the pale face of a girl, completely unconscious, apparently from exhaustion, since there were no traces of bodily injury.

In a moment, Smithy had her over his broad shoulder and, Rope Trick beside him, began the return trip—but he had hardly covered a mile before he caught sight of perhaps eight squatting, catlike things lined up ahead of him, their wicked faceted eyes glowing with unholy fires in the joveshine.

Smithy stopped and smiled inside his helmet glass.

"Zinrots, eh? Wondered how long they'd be. . . ."

HE TUGGED out his jet pistol, leveled it, and marched on again. The zinrots held their ground, standing in characteristic fashion with sharply clawed front paws widely straddled.

The ape-like faces filled with a demoniac ferocity and cunning, easily made them the most dangerous look-

ing, hostile creatures on the satellite. Added to this was their keen intelligence, level with an Earthling's, but warped by a queer glandular secretion that stifled all traces of sentiment. The outcome was inhuman ferocity and implacable intellect.

With steady tread, Smithy still moved forward, eyes narrowed menacingly, right arm clamped round the bloated legs of the girl over his shoulder. Then he halted and fired deliberately as the leading zinrot suddenly charged— It vanished in a blinding flash, its basic atoms changed into energy.

That was sufficient for the others. With terrible claws distended in catlike fashion, they hurled themselves on the struggling Earthman. Two-inch steely talons scratched and raked on the viltex helmet; teeth bit furiously and futilely at the metal mesh of his space-suit. Nothing short of an explosive could get through it, however.

"Damned blasted little devils!" he raged, plowing through the midst of them. He kicked and slammed around with his heavy boots, bringing his jet pistol into action wherever he could, until its constant recoiling kick began to make his arm ache.

He changed his tactics suddenly, put the gun back and flicked a button inside his huge glove. Immediately, a curved scimitar blade sprang from its sheath on his arm. He gripped the handle tightly and slashed with ruthless malevolence, literally hacking his way forward. He sliced the blade through the neck of a nearer zinrot and glimpsed the savage head jump clean from the body, which immediately spouted fast-freezing humor.

Another one he carved in the belly and hurled it writhing to the ground;

still another he kicked in the face and sent spinning fifty yards. . . . And all the time Rope Trick writhed in impotent fury, a blue fog, unable to lend assistance for the simple reason that the two major life forms of Ganymede were so utterly opposite in physical properties that they could not attack each other. . . .

Further decimating sweeps finally cooled even the inhuman courage of the zinrots; this raging Earthman was too dangerous. The survivors turned and fled in vast leaps, vanishing at last down the nearest zin-pit half a mile away. Smithy breathed hard and watched them go, then re-sheathing his scimitar he went on again, weary and drenched in perspiration.

"Wish I could figure those damn things out," he muttered, and his thoughts impacted to the rolling light beside him. "They've got the brain of a man and the savagery of a tiger. The two make a hellish combination. . . ."

Rope Trick did not essay any written response. Going ahead, he curled up in a palpitating haze outside the external valve of the refueling station. Smithy came up at last and twisted the lock-switches. In five minutes he was back in the warm interior and laid the girl gently down on his own bed.

Once he was out of his space-suit, he began to unscrew her helmet, soon had the heavy protective suit sinking like a pricked balloon on the floor beside him.

LONELY JITTERS

SHE lay very still as he bathed her white face and tried to force a draft of vita-acid between her pale lips. She swallowed

hard and stirred as the strong fluid went down her throat.

Smithy sat down on the bed edge and contemplated her. She was blond, with regular but not beautiful features and a slim, well-built body—obviously refined, he decided. He couldn't recollect having seen her before on his rare visits to the Settlement.

At length, the vita-acid had the desired effect. She threw a well-rounded black-clad arm over her forehead, moved weakly. Then her blue eyes opened suddenly and settled on Smithy's lean and puzzled face. The sight of him jerked away the last traces of lethargy.

"You're—you're Smithson, aren't you?" she asked, with the noticeable accent of a New Yorker.

"Yeah. I suppose you're one of these confounded Ganymedian tourists who lost your way?"

His laconic tone did not nettle her; she sat up with a serious expression.

"I'm no tourist; I'm Evania Dodd, daughter of Commandant Dodd of the X-16. I—er— You rescued me, I suppose?"

Smithy laughed shortly. "What do you think? You were out there on the plain as flat as a Plutonian buzzard. How the hell did you get there, anyway?"

"Walked," she said naively. "How'd you come to find me?"

"Rope Trick did that."

"Whom?"

"Skip it." Smithy rose to his feet and plunged his hands in his pockets, scowled down at her.

"Mebbe you'll tell me what you're doing away from the Settlement?"

"You're not very sociable, are you?" she pouted, lifting her slender legs and planting her feet on the shiny floor. "What's wrong with you? Jitters?"

"Perhaps," he admitted briefly. "Chief snag is that women aren't allowed at this refueling station. You ought to know that by now. The 68-Y will be here soon and Dawlish is a stickler for rules. You'll have to be gone by then."

She smiled oddly at that, watched him as he prowled around her.

"Where'll I go?" she asked slowly.

"Where? Back to the Settlement where you came from, of course!"

She said quietly, "There isn't one any more, Smithson!"

That halted him with an amazed gasp. Twirling around, he gripped her slim shoulders.

"Isn't one!" he shouted hoarsely. "What do you mean? Quick! Tell me!"

Again she brushed the arm over her forehead.

"I guess I'm still a bit rocky," she whispered. "Had nothing to eat for ages. . . ."

Smithy cursed his forgetfulness and strode to the provision chamber. He held his patience as he watched the girl eat and drink avidly. The color slowly returned to her features.

"I'm the only survivor," she said after a while, between munches. "Something happened. Something queer came into being under the Settlement floors—clean through six feet of lanium metal. The stuff came up in frozen spires and produced terrific explosions by the fusion of cold and warm air. . . . Somehow I got away, though I hardly remember how I managed it. I'd no time to bring food, gun, or—or anything."

Smithy stared at her fixedly. "You mean that every scrap of the Settlement was destroyed?" he insisted incredulously.

"Yes. Space-machines and everything. Four explosions finished the business. . . ." She regarded him

with a level, half-challenging gaze. "Maybe you'll apologize for being so rude to me when you know that I tried to get here in order to warn you. Your air supply comes from the Settlement; your reserve cylinders will exhaust themselves any time."

"Suppose we call it quits, since you had no place else to go?" he suggested; then smiled. "Thanks all the same, Eva. . . ." His brow furrowed and he stroked his chin. "This is damned serious!" he declared finally. "We—"

"There's something else too, though it may not be important," she interrupted him. "After the first explosion, I ventured to look at the spire that caused it, and believe it or not, I got the worst attack of lonely jitters I've ever known! Gosh, I wanted to kill myself right there and then."

Smithy's eyes had a far-away look. "You did, eh? I'm just beginning to wonder if solitarius melancholia is all the experts claim it to be. They say it's the planet's frigid climate; now I'm thinking it may be deliberately induced depression. Maybe those damned zinrots are trying to make us kill ourselves; maybe it was they who blew up the Settlement—"

HE BROKE off suddenly and gazed with the girl through the open doorway of the adjoining power room. From within it had come a slight sound—a low, subdued crackling that was something quite different from the usual rhythm of the engines.

"What the hell—" Smithy began, then he jumped to his feet and strode forward. The girl came quickly behind him, but before they reached the doorway, they were both

suddenly hurled into the center of the living room by the blast of a tremendous concussion.

Superheated air gushed momentarily around them; for an instant their eyes were blinded by intensely brilliant light. Smithy picked himself up with a throbbing head and twitching eyes, wiped a trickle of blood from his gashed cheek. Quickly, he hauled the alarmed girl to her feet.

"Hurt, Eva?"

She shook her head quickly. "What happened in there? Sounded like—"

"Like a frozen spire, eh?" He looked at her grimly for a moment, then went forward again. Standing on the threshold of the immense pump room, he stared at a solitary spire of slate-gray material, innumerable faceted, projecting through the midst of the shattered center-aisle floor. Even as he watched, he could feel intense waves of biting cold ranging from it; at the same time a crushing conviction of lonely jitters descended upon him.

"It is a spire!" the girl cried, coming to his side, "the same sort of thing that blew up the settlement. . . . You—you feel the jitters?"

"And how!" Smithy's eyes narrowed; he found it an effort to control his will. "This sort of thing is deliberate, Eva; I'm convinced of it."

He turned abruptly and snatched his jet pistol from the rack. The girl shook her head moodily.

"No use. We tried that at the Settlement. You'll only slice off a bit of the stuff, at the most—"

"That's all I need," Smithy answered, tight-lipped, and leveled the pistol at the spire. The jet snicked off a small lump and sent it clattering to the floor, but before Smithy could move towards it, another dev-

ilish spire suddenly burst into view with a thunderous explosion at the far end of the place, toppling over a massive generator and instantly stopping the main power supply of the pump room.

Smithy gazed for an instant in alarm. He found himself suddenly drawing breath only by extreme effort. Twisting around, he found Eva slumped wearily against the doorpost, her breast heaving frantically in the struggle for air, her face suddenly shining with perspiration.

"Air—air supply stopping!" she managed to gasp out. "Your reserve tanks must be . . . be empty . . ." She gulped, reeled dizzily. Instantly Smithy caught her in his arms.

Half-dragging her, he moved to the space-suit closet, lifted her limp body into one of the heavy coverings and screwed the helmet into position. The moment the air cylinder was switched on, she began to recover.

Scrambling into his own suit, he linked up his outer microphone and spoke quickly.

"Better?"

His words came clearly in her ear-phones. Her head nodded behind the viltex glass. "I'm all right now, but what are we going to do? You realize that this place is as doomed as the Settlement, I suppose?"

He nodded. The dull heaviness of the jitters was still in his eyes.

"Yeah, I realize that, but I'm not leaving here without taking a closer look at these spires."

With that, he returned to the power room and picked up the lump of material he had sliced earlier on, lifting it carefully in insulated clamps. Back in the living room, he thrust the substance into the super-microscopic analyzer and switched on the current, gazing intently at the reflecting screen.

Eva's eyes widened in surprise as she watched.

"Why, it's electrical! Internally, anyhow."

SMITHY nodded quickly. "These darn things are connected somewhere underground to powerful electrical engines. Quite a good device for destroying anything made of lanium. Lanium's molecular constitution is such that it breaks down before intense electrical fields. By the same token, these things radiate electrical waves which have a dampening effect on the slight electric constitution of the brain. Result—jitters."

The girl stared at the magnified metallic fragment.

"But—but jitters were here long before these things put in an appearance," she pointed out.

"I know, but the dampening effect, with the correct machinery, could easily be generated without these devices. This is simply a prize idea to cause destruction. Only one explanation is possible. The zinrots are at the bottom of it. They live Heaven knows how far under Ganymede's surface; they've got an intelligence easily level with a human's and they're fiendishly jealous of anybody invading their territory. Our mineral fuel-bores have driven deep and perhaps caused them plenty of upset. Now they've gotten rid of everybody on Ganymede except us. . . ."

He straightened up from the screen. "Guess they're too smart to deal with single-handed," he muttered. "I just wonder how they generate their electric power. . . ."

He stopped and glanced quickly across the pump room. Two more spires had explosively appeared. Then he started violently as a sudden thought struck him.

"Outside—quick!" he yelled hoarsely, and spinning the bewildered girl around in a fierce clutch, he whirled her to the inner valve, snatching his provision satchel and jet pistol on the way.

As the valve opened, the lights suddenly expired; the power had stopped. Smithy flicked the button on his belt battery and his head-lamp came into action. With frantic speed, he dragged the girl through the locks, left them open behind him, and, with boots tuned to Gany-normal, they vaulted away from the refueling station in wild, desperate leaps, hardly noticing the fact that Rope Trick uncurled from the ground nearby and kept them company.

At two miles distance from the station, Smithy at last came to a halt, listening to the whistle of the girl's hard breathing in her microphone. She looked back with him, rather wonderingly.

They had not long to wait. Abruptly the distant dome of the station vanished in a blinding sheet of flame; a deeply reverberating concussion shook the black ground. . . .

Smithy smiled bitterly. "Exit!" he commented shortly. "There goes ten years of good American construction."

"But what happened?" the girl asked mystifiedly. "The place went up like a powder magazine."

"What else did you expect? I happened to notice that that latest spire was pushing itself upwards directly towards one of the seven fuel storage tanks. Once its point punctured the tank, the itterbim inside would immediately explode. We'd have gone too if we hadn't scrambled out as we did."

"I see. . . . Guess that makes us quits, doesn't it?"

"Quits?"

"Certainly. I saved you and you saved me. Now, where do we go from here? We've no space-ships and no friends—all nice and peaceful with a million enemies under our feet."

Smithy didn't answer her. He stood looking around him in the weak light of the risen sun, well above the horizon like a bright star. On the opposite horizon, vast Jove still loomed in all his frightening majesty, part of his disk hidden now by the ridges of the Excelsiors.

At length, Smithy turned. His face was curiously set.

"To reach me you came through the Excelsiors, of course?"

"You bet I did! Why?"

"I was just thinking it's a good thing you have mountaineering knowledge, because you're surely going to need it. Our only chance of escape from this infernal place lies in our reaching the table top at the summit of Thunder Molar!"

"What!" She stared at him incredulously. "Why— You're crazy! It's three thousand feet up, and absolutely sheer!"

"It isn't sheer; pioneers have made steps and acclivities all the way to the top. Don't you see, Eva, it's the only way? We've no space-ship to get away in. In roughly twenty-four hours, at 39-12, to be exact—Gany time, that is—the 68-Y will be here for refueling. We've got to be somewhere we can signal, and the only place is on top of Thunder Molar, if we can make it in time."

"But why not stay by the demolished fuel station until the 68-Y lands?" she demanded.

"Because the zinrots will be after us. Don't you see that the moment they find they haven't bumped us off in the station, they'll turn out in force to get us?" Smithy glanced

up at the beclouded Molar. "It's the only way," he muttered. "We've got the necessary rope cable and boot-spikes in our space-suit kit, so there's nothing to stop us."

Eva shrugged. "O.K. Since we're liable to be killed in any case, we may as well make it spectacular."

She turned and began to clump along beside him. Ahead of them, Rope Trick twirled and writhed uneasily, suddenly formed into a written question and hovered in the now slightly windy air.

"What about the Carbodox Blizards?"

"Got to chance it," Smith mentally returned.

"They're due any day. You'll never make Thunder Molar."

"We've just got to, Ropy—unless you've a better idea?"

Rope Trick hadn't. He elongated into a streamer again and kept the two company as they moved along.

A HOSTILE WORLD

AFTER a while, Rope Trick went on a little distance ahead, came back again at top speed, twirling into a further message.

"Zinrots closing in on you in a circle!"

Smithy came to a stop, lips compressed. He stared at the girl's anxious face.

"Just what I expected," he muttered. "If they make a really determined effort to wipe us out, we're sunk. All the jet pistols and scimitar knives on Ganymede won't avail us anything. . . . And you're unarmed, too. . . ."

The girl looked quickly around her. At the moment, the barren unimaginably cold plain was deserted, but that did not fool her. Years on Gany-

mede had taught her, as it had Smithy, all the answers with regard to the zinrots—their crafty methods of approach, their almost non-reflecting black bodies against the barren ground. Rope Trick had seen them, and he was to be implicitly relied upon.

At last Smithy strode forward again. "Have to keep going and fight for it when the time comes, that's all. Come on!"

But he stopped once more as Rope Trick became a sentence.

"Don't advance. Stand still. I'll fix this. Wait."

Then he was off towards the Excelsiors like a luminous air serpent, traveling with the demoniacal speed for which, when under stress, he was phenomenal.

Smithy frowned and looked at the girl.

"Can't see what he can do. Gasheads and zinrots are as apart as Mercury and Pluto; can't harm each other. . . ."

She said nothing, then after a while her gloved hand gripped his arm. She pointed quickly. Straining his eyes in the various lights, Smithy could discern a distant circle of black moving slowly inward on every side. He caught the jovelight reflecting from deadly claws; here and there the facets of merciless eyes flashed like transitory diamonds. . . . The advance of the zinrots had come very close, moving with the implacability that spelt certain death.

Smithy tugged out his gun. His lips were a tight line.

"Guess Ropy can't sort this one out," he breathed. "Here goes!"

Dropping on one knee and pulling Eva down beside him, he leveled his gun at the approaching line, but as his finger quivered on the trigger-switch, he stopped and looked up in

amazement. The Jove-filled sky was suddenly thick with clouds of twisting blue vapor. Not one Rope Trick, but literally thousands were writhing and twisting there in a gyrating scum, oozing and flowing downwards with gradually thickening density.

"I get it!" Eva cried, jumping up so swiftly that she nearly overbalanced. "Ropy and his comrades are changing into a fog—a smoke screen. Zinrots can't see through fog."

Smithy grinned happily as he scrambled up beside her. "You're dead right! They're sunk!"

They stood waiting eagerly, and at length the vast conglomeration of interwoven Gasbrains had enveloped the zinrots entirely, leaving one long corridor stretching across the plains to the foothills of the Excelsiors.

When that happened, Smithy and the girl started to run, covering the ground in huge flying leaps, listening to the wails and subhuman shrieks of the vicious creatures from the murk as they traveled. Now and again, a piece of fog detached itself from the main bulk, formed briefly into a directional arrow, then re-assembled into mass unity.

At the end of forty-five minutes of frenzied effort, they covered the length of the corridor and gained the lowest foothills of the Excelsiors, emerged from the clinging vapors and looked back on a blue opacity stretching for a vast distance over the plain. Then as they went on again, the Gasbrains began to disperse.

The zinrots, courageous and jealous though they were, would never risk the slippery foothills; they were physically unfitted for the task.

The way now lay ever upwards—first through Echoing Pass, then into Whirlwind Canyon, and so up to the defiles and tortuous ascents of Thun-

der Molar. It towered above the two as they stared up at it. Its white frozen escarpments glittered in the faint sunlight and stronger jove-shine.

From this point, the acclivities were invisible, but Smithy knew that indomitable Earthmen had found a way to the top of the mountain—a top which was invisible from below. Clouds were writhing around it, hurled from the range's opposite side where the Twin Winds gathered. They gave promise of the Ganymedian season of the Carbodox Blizzards, smothering downpours of frozen carbon dioxide from which the abbreviated name was derived.

Smithy's face was grim as he stared up.

"Excelsior is right!" he murmured feelingly, then he looked up sharply as Rope Trick, detached from his fellows, floated into view.

"Thanks a lot, Ropy. You got us out of a hell of a jam."

The Gasbrain made no effort to form an answer. He kept up with the two as they resumed their careful advance along the glassy ground.

BY THE end of two more hours of rough, hard going, they reached the outskirts of Echoing Pass and, from common knowledge, headed for the nearest cave for rest and food.

They found one easily enough and experienced no discomfort. Their space-suits were perfectly warmed and regulated; the food traps in the helmets functioned faultlessly and provided them with all the food and drink tablets they needed.

Outside the cave, Rope Trick curled into a ball and slept. Beyond him was the view of the mighty sheer-faced North Glacier, its upper notches lost in the swirling clouds.

Jupiter was out of sight; the Carbodox was about to break.

The moaning of the Twin Winds came back from the nearby Echoing Pass in a million forms, and as usual, owing to the eternal caprices of the air currents, the sounds were never reflected in the order received. Sometimes they were utterly reversed. Men in the pioneering days had been known to go insane when they lost themselves in Echoing Pass; its weirdness unbalanced the brain. . . .

Smithy and the girl slept many hours. Weak sunshine sifted through the clouds as they "breakfasted," but by the time they had fitted the spiked clips to their boots in readiness for the ascent of the Molar, the brightness of day had gone. Instead, the first big whirling flakes of the Blizzard were whisking past the entrance to the cave.

Once outside, the flakes plastered to their glass helmets, flakes of frozen carbon dioxide driven by a raging tempest that was steadily growing stronger.

Drawing his cable-steel rope from about his waist, Smithy knotted it loosely around the girl's waist. He caught her faint smile in the dim light.

"All set?" he asked, purposely refraining from mentioning the dangers ahead.

She crossed two begloved fingers. "All set!"

Turning around, he started the advance, digging his spiked boots hard into the glassy ground, sole-shields fixed to third Earth normal to give his feet added weight on the treacherous surface. By his side, ragged tendrils of mist whipping in the wind, came Rope Trick, expanding and contracting weirdly as he drew in the poisonous atmosphere for his nourishment.

In twenty minutes, they reached the center of the Pass, high atop a rocky ledge leading around to Whirlwind Canyon three hundred feet higher up. And it was here that the first mishap befell them.

Eva, in endeavoring to make a small leap, suddenly slipped. Her wild scream re-echoed strangely in the chasm and the steel rope suddenly tautened as the noose slapped up under her armpits. The jerk sent Smithy sliding to the edge of the glassy defile.

He dug his heels savagely, clamped his hands over the rope with despairing effort. The ice shaved into brittle shards under the digging rip of his spikes—but for all his frantic effort and tension, he wasn't quick enough to save the girl.

She vanished over the edge of the defile, dragging him after her. . . . He dropped slowly, thanks to the slight gravity, felt himself torn and whipped by the gale until he finally landed on a broad ledge some distance below.

In a moment he was on his feet. "Eva! Are you hurt?"

"Hurt you . . . Are Eva . . ." flung back at him from the unseen walls of the Pass.

HE STUMBLED forward in the whirling scurry of flakes, following the length of rope backwards until he came upon the girl getting to her feet. Her face was white in the dimness; she laughed nervously.

"Darn silly trick, wasn't it?" she asked shakily. "I sure thought you'd have to send me flowers that time."

Smithy gripped her ballooned body tightly to him. Somehow he hadn't realized until this moment that that body was very precious to him. He stared anxiously about him. The

sheer face of the cliff loomed in the smother, utterly unscalable.

"We're stuck!" he whispered hoarsely. "No way up and no way down!" He stopped, aghast at the discovery, then struck with a sudden thought, he adjusted his outer microphone to full volume and yelled, "Hey, Ropy! Where are you? Rope Trick!"

"Trick Rope . . . Eerope!" cackled the Pass. "Eerope! Are you where . . ."

Nothing happened. The echoing ceased. The Gasbrain didn't appear. Smithy fumed and stared down into the wild Carbodox flaked chasm. Time and again he called; fifteen minutes slid by.

"Damn!" he swore at last. "He would do this just when we need him! Where in hell can he have gotten to . . .? Hey, you slithering, catherine wheel, give us a hand down here!"

". . . here down hand. . . . Slither here. . . . Earslith. . . ."

"Blast these echoes!" Smithy glared around him. "About the most idiotic thing on an idiotic world. Might tickle a tourist pink, but I'm no tourist. Ro-py!" he bawled.

And suddenly the Gasbrain appeared, shooting out of the snowstorm along the ledge from some distance ahead, apparently emerging in the first place from the solid cliff face.

Smithy blinked in amazement. "Now how in hell did you . . ." He didn't finish his sentence but watched as Rope Trick, hiding from the direct force of the wind in a slight curve of the wall, conveyed a tattered message.

"Way through cliff! Tunnel. Leads to Whirlwind Canyon. Safe way out. Follow. . . ."

Without hesitation, the two com-

plied, clinging to each other and picking their way carefully. To their amazement, Rope Trick was right. They moved into a fairly wide tunnel entrance some distance further on. Flaking the snow from their helmets, they studied the place in the light of their lamps.

The tunnel went on an obvious rise for nearly a mile, then its ragged floor was suddenly broken by a pit perhaps fifty feet in width. When they reached it, they peered cautiously over its smooth, obviously machine-made edge.

Just for a moment, they could hardly credit the thing they saw. The pit went down into bottomlessness, an immeasurably deep shaft at the base of which reposed the unmistakable outlines of some sort of city. Tiny though it was, the biting thinness of the air rendered every detail crystal clear. It was possible to see a certain ordered symmetry of buildings, floodlit from a source unknown, together with streets and squares.

Smithy drew a deep breath from his cylinder. "Now I get it! That city must be where the zinrots hang out; this thing is some kind of ventilation shaft. Nobody has ever been able to find how deep down they live. That city is proof alone of their human intelligence. No doubt they resent our interference in drilling for mineral as much as New Yorkers would resent an air raid. . . . Bet they use the water of these glacier mountains for their electricity generation."

"Correct," affirmed the body of Rope Trick, hovering over the pit. "Zinrots below. This tunnel leads to Whirlwind Canyon. Air current through mountain necessary for zinrots' city below. They made it. I found this by accident. Come. . ."

Smithy unhooked the cable from

his belt, gathered himself together and leapt the fifty-foot gap with ease. In another moment, the girl had whirled to his side. They went on again, once more in harness, and after a distance of nearly three miles through the twining white tunnel, they emerged into the thick of the storm high on the main acclivity of Whirlwind Canyon, Echoing Pass lost far below in the tumult.

The darkness of the storm had deepened to that of night. Their head-lamps were the only illuminants that reflected on the glassy, frosty wall close beside them. On the other side was the sheer nothingness of that dreadful gulf, lashed by the Twin Winds battering from one side of the Excelsiors to the other, a hurricane so terrific that when it occasionally snatched savagely at them if they moved too far from the wall, it threatened to hurl them into the seething depths.

The Carbodox Blizzard whirled thicker and thicker, plastering their helmets so heavily that they moved as though blind, massive gloves wiping incessantly at the glass to reveal only more hurtling flakes. . . . Time and again the struggling Rope Trick, battling with all his weird form to stay consistent in the gale, descended swiftly and guided them over particularly difficult points.

Once around the corner of the Canyon, they were open to a brief moment of level glass-like plain until they started on the final dangerous ascent to the summit of Thunder Molar.

FIGHT TO THE SUMMIT



ON THE plain, the driving blinding cataract of flakes hid from sight the sudden attack of a flock of armobats, deadly vulture-like birds inhabiting the

higher ramparts of the Excelsiors, only venturing from their icy homes when the Carbodex season made it unsafe for them to stay any longer.

Almost before they realized what was happening, Smithy and the girl found themselves in the midst of whirling, savage darts of flying fury, things that were a cross between an armadillo and a bat, moving with bullet swiftness and provided with deadly pincer teeth in top and bottom jaws.

Smithy tumbled and fell knee-deep in snow; the pull on the cable dragged the girl down too. In that position, he tore out his pistol and fired desperately, flicked one bird in half and sent a sizzling gust of destruction amidst the descending billows. Another armobat hurtled down from behind and pecked fiercely at his helmet, left a distinct scrape of razor teeth on the viltex glass.

Smithy let out a yell. "Keep going, Eva! If we stop still, these devil's 'll get us!"

He got up and floundered onwards, dragging the girl with him. This time Rope Trick could do nothing. He was not big enough to form into a protective fog by himself, and even if he had been, the Twin Winds would have made the feat impossible. All he could do, and did, was to swirl in and out and confuse the armobats' projectile sweepings.

Two of the flying horrors were split into pieces by the flaying jet pistol; yet another one dashed its head clean into its scaly body by plunging too savagely at Eva's metal-mesh space-suit. The impact left a dent in it and momentarily brought the girl to her knees—then she was up again, battling and plunging through the piling snow.

For an hour, the fearful things whirled and whizzed in the raging

storm, then as the plateau was gradually left behind and the ascent of the last Thunder Molar acclivity began, the things became scarcer and finally disappeared.

The two were left alone again—save for Rope Trick—in their whirling world of blinding snow, darkness, and the ever eternal roaring of the Twin Winds. . . .

FOR another hour, they struggled onwards, having no idea of what distance they had covered, since everything was enveloped in the same blanketing dark—but at the end of that time, they gained a slightly more protected ledge and paused to rest. Rope Trick curled up behind them, palpitating visibly with the vast strains to which he had been subjected.

"Think we'll make it?" the girl asked, wiping the plastered flakes from her glass.

Smithy looked gloomily at the hurricane. "Mebbe," he said pessimistically. "Our lamps are beginning to run out. The batteries are going down. . ." He stared at the yellow glow of the girl's lamp and fell to thought.

She said nothing. Like him, she was wondering if, even when they reached the top of the Molar—if they ever did—it would prove worth the effort? Suppose the 68-Y didn't come? Suppose the— But what was the use of vain, despondent surmise?

They went on again at last, somewhat refreshed by the rest.

Minutes and hours seemed negligible things in their vast strugglings. They were commencing to feel exhausted, and with every foot they went up, the danger increased by reason of their almost exhausted lamp batteries.

They became mechanical, slipping and sliding, constantly ascending automatons, plugging up frozen, brittle steps that went higher and ever higher. They almost forgot that the faithful Rope Trick was always with them, doing what little he could in his loyal way to assist them—

Then with amazing suddenness, they were in the midst of clear air with the dense clouds below them! The Twin Winds ceased their fury and dropped to gale strength. Almost overhead loomed vast Jupiter, and, at the zenith, the weak sun. The 7-day Ganymedian day was half-way spent.

The sky at this height was black, scattered with innumerable brilliant stars, dominated apart from Jupiter by the remaining eight moons.

Smithy stopped and drew a deep breath of relief. He and the girl were almost at the top of the Molar; immediately above them, clear against the stars, was the flat table-land summit.

"We made it!" he yelled. "Eva, we made it!"

She turned and looked back on the woolly clouds of the Carbodox Blizard in the sun and joves shine below. The words she intended to utter were interrupted by another shout from Smithy as he stood directly above her on the slope.

"The 68-Y! There! Help me signal! Do something!"

The girl was just in time to see a vast smooth-sided 500-foot monster of the void, port lights gleaming, go sliding noiselessly over the summit of the Molar, heading direct for the ruined refueling station hidden below the clouds.

A hollow groan escaped Smithy. He waved his arms frantically and yelled through his full-volumed mi-

crophone— But it was no use. The giant liner passed on.

Then the girl caught up with him. "Quick! To the top! If the 68-Y goes away, we're done for. Come on!"

He floundered along beside her, speaking in gasps.

"Even then I'm wondering if it will be of any use. It'll be like a couple of ants on the top of Everest."

"We need a beacon, or something," she said worriedly.

Smithy became silent, flogging his brains for an idea. He was still flogging them when they gained the flat table-land and sank down to rest.

Rope Trick quivered up beside them. The girl regarded his gaseous form speculatively.

"We might get him to make a written signal," she suggested, but Smithy shook his head gloomily.

"I guess not. It's not very likely that the 68-Y will come back over the Molar. When Dawlish finds the station's gone he'll head for the next nearest on Io and we'll be left behind. What we need is a flare—something to really attract attention."

He clubbed his gloved hands together in frantic thought, but ideas just wouldn't come. He was mentally and physically worn out.

Then suddenly Rope Trick glided forward. In a few seconds he wrote his message.

"Your thoughts tell me you need a signal. Right?"

"And how!" Smithy affirmed feelingly. "Any suggestions?"

"Yes. It is easy when you understand the chemistry of this world as I do. There are plentiful supplies of liquid oxygen on the floor of this table-land, at a temperature of slightly above 300 degrees below zero. You know that?"

"Sure," Smithy growled, frowning. "So what?"

Rope Trick resumed. "This plentitude of liquid oxygen makes some substances, such as cotton fabric, as dangerous as explosive, if ignited. That's why your boots and space-suits are made of materials noninflammable on this world. What you have to do is to find a piece of cloth and put it on the floor here. When the 68-W appears, fire the cloth with your jet pistol. The friction of the jet alone will be enough. There'll be a tremendous explosion visible for miles—a perfect signal."

"By gosh, he's right," Eva cried excitedly; then her face fell. "But where do we get cotton fabric from?"

Smith grinned and rose to his feet. He withdrew his arms from the folds of his space-suit sleeves and tore a piece out his shirt, putting it in the small external valve of the suit. Once his arms were back in the sleeves, it was a simple matter to extract the fabric from the small trap.

"Like getting out of your vest with a coat on," he commented, dropping the jagged square on the floor at his feet. Then he and the girl watched in silence as it changed to a frozen gray appearance in that inconceivably cold atmosphere.

They had not long to wait. Fifteen minutes later the huge ovoid of the 68-Y vomited up in the distance through the clouds, pointed directly towards Io.

Instantly Smithy fired the jet pistol in his hand, struck the explosive cotton clean in the center. He had no idea of what really happened after

that. The universe seemed to vanish in a sheet of blinding fire.

He was hurled backwards by a terrific blasting explosion, glimpsed Rope Trick vanishing in a blaze of light, saw Eva turning somersaults as she came towards him. . . . Then everything was dark—

WHEN he moved his aching head again, he found himself staring into the rugged face of Dawlish, commander of the 68-Y. He smiled a little.

"O.K., Smithy," he murmured. "You and Miss Dodd are all right—nothing worse than a broken leg for you and a broken arm for her. We got your signal all right and picked you up in a safety ship. But say," he asked wonderingly, "what the hell were you doing on the Molar? Where's the refuel station?"

Smithy winced, glanced around the cool hospital ward.

"Tell you later mebbe," he answered, then a sudden thought struck him. "You didn't see anything of a gas around the Molar, did you?"

"Gas? No; why?"

Smithy made no reply. So loyal old Rope Trick had been ignited and destroyed by the very explosion he had himself suggested! That was loyalty surpassing earth's own. . . .

Eva? A broken arm? Smithy grinned faintly. Well that would not stop him putting a ring on her finger when they reached the American settlement at Io—if she'd have him.

She did—fourteen hours later.

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**FUTURE FICTION
SCIENCE FICTION**

The World of Tomorrow

by CHARLES D. HORNIG—Editor

THIS YEAR, millions of persons from every corner of the Earth are visiting the greatest of all World Fairs—"Whelan's Wonderland" in New York City. Everyone, whether or not they have seen this great exhibition of Man's accomplishments, is familiar with the much-publicized Trylon and Perisphere, together with the words—"The World of Tomorrow."

The greatest wonders of Man's ingenuity are made public at this vast Fair, where there is an atmosphere of—"Tomorrow." After viewing the spectacular exhibits there, no man can depart without a profound faith in the future expanse of Mankind's progress—his future harnessing of more efficient sources of power—his future conquering of Nature's greatest obstacles—his future advance in art and culture.

Everything at the Fair is dominated by the Future and its possibilities. The Past is unchangeable. The Present is really nonexistent. But the Future is Man's to mold as he will! This is the gift of the Creator—for, barring a cataclysm of Nature, Man controls his own destiny.

As an entire entity, a man is superior to any other animal on Earth, but there are many flaws in our culture that we do not find in inferior beings. The lower animals kill each other for food, as a general rule, but men destroy their brothers for sport and personal superiority. Inferior creatures rarely go hungry when there is a plentiful supply of food—but men starve amidst a surplus of edibles! This shows us that Man can do much to improve his culture and society. Yes, we are superior in intelligence to Earth's other inhabitants, but we are far from perfection!

During the Dark Ages, there was little progress because of the utter lack of imagination possessed by people of those centuries. Anything beyond their ken was witchcraft or sorcery. As the world emerged from this period, people became more tolerant with new conceptions, less sceptical of revolutionary, progressive suggestions. Mankind has forged ahead in direct ratio to a constantly increasing tolerance between men and their original thoughts. Such miraculous developments of science as the radio, telephone, automobile, airplane, and electrical equipment has tended to dull the sceptic's dogmatic disbelief during the last half-century. Each new marvel strengthens the faith of the layman in the more advanced theories, makes him more imaginative and tolerant. Intolerance, the prime detriment to progress, is fast receding as a human quality, thereby opening wide vistas of accomplishment for the Future.

Each individual man lives a pitifully short time. He does not have the oppor-

tunity to look very far into the Future, except in an impersonal manner, because he himself cannot hope to be a part of it. Science-fiction readers, for instance, long for the days of atomic power and space-travel, but it is very doubtful that any alive today will ever view these things in actual effect. We know they are coming, but we fear that we ourselves shall never see them.

IT IS the purpose of FUTURE FICTION to carry its readers into this Future, far beyond their life-expectancy—to show them the marvels that will be enjoyed by their children, and their children's children. This we do, not in a cold, technical manner—but in the form of living, vivid adventure, such as you would experience, were you born a century or two later—or perhaps a thousand years beyond your time.

We are thrilled by the great stories of the past—but they are limited and cannot be changed. We are interested in the stories of the present, because they are happening to our contemporaries. But the glowing episodes of the Future thrill us greatest of all—because the Future is yet unformed and there is no limit to the variety of possibilities, or the play of our imagination! Anything might happen, and one man's guess is as good as another's!

The men that do the guessing in FUTURE FICTION are competent authors who dare to expose the adventures of our descendants! They bring us almost bodily into the midst of glamorous activity far ahead of our own era. We can live, through their vivid imagination, for thousands of years! We can view the World of Tomorrow through the eyes of men who think about the Future and have faith in the ultimate goal of Man!

Many times, in these living stories of real people, we are brought close to disaster—we struggle through terrors and cataclysms that depopulate the Earth. Sometimes we soar into the void, far into space, and visit the other worlds that circle our sun—Mars, Venus, Jupiter!—or the planets of other stars deep in the stretches of Infinity! On these other worlds we meet the intelligence of other evolutionary chains, fight and work with them. Some stories bring us to the very end, when our sun dies and Man seeks a new home. Occasionally, we find ourselves in a world of one great government—a world of peace, of brotherhood, of science.

You can escape the irrevocable past, break the bonds of the monotonous Present—allow your soul to flare freely into the unformed Future, through the pages of FUTURE FICTION.

The World of Tomorrow is yours—Today!

The Infinite Eye

by PHILIP JACQUES BARTEL

—An Ancient Secret Saves the Race of Man!—



Arrested in mid-air, the sub-man collapsed to the ground!

A pitiful thing was Man in those latter days—with his shriveled legs that disuse had atrophied. His foolhardiness brings him face to face with doom as the sources of energy exhaust themselves—until Jones-Bert evolves a daring plan of salvation!

JONES-BERT, Historian-Council Director, gaped in amazement at the unexpected face in the visitor's screen of his tiny apartment.

"A messenger from the Supreme Council!" he gasped. "What do they want on my rest-day?"

His bulging, bald head wrinkled in deep thought, and he rubbed his shrunken chin reflectively. He blinked as the annunciator buzzed impatiently, and wheeled to the panel. The grim face on the screen relaxed as the Historian signaled permission to enter.

Bert fixed his eyes on the doorway. In a moment he would know what important matter had caused this interruption of his well-earned holiday.

At once, the door slid open and a figure bearing the silver baton of the Supreme-Council glided into the room. For a second, Bert's eyes traveled over the intruder.

But for a slight facial difference, the men might have been twins—the same bald, bulging head and narrow jaws, clothed alike in silken gown. Each used the motor-carriage that had replaced the lost function of his legs.

The visitor removed his transparent weather-hood with a swift motion and bobbed his shining skull in greeting.

"Jones-Bert," he growled, "I am Wells-Jon, Governor of the Energy-Council! As this silver baton will evidence, I bear an important message from the Supreme Body of the Family Councils of the World!"

"You are welcome, reverent sir," bobbed Bert nervously. "Why am I

honored with a visit from the Great Council? You could have used the telecaster—"

"Telecaster!" snapped Jon irritably. "We dared not!" He dashed to the panel and ran his fingers nimbly over the controls. "I must make sure that we cannot be overheard. What I have to say deserves the utmost secrecy, or the entire world will be thrown into a panic from which it will never recover!"

"If—the—venerable—Governor—will—explain—" stuttered the bewildered Bert.

Jon nodded grimly. "Though you do not know it, there was an Emergent Communication of the Supreme Council, at Xenonia, this morning!"

"An Emergent Communication!" echoed Bert. "Then some danger threatens the world! What is it?"

The Governor drew a long breath. "In this Fifty-Fifth Century of Light, our so-called perfect civilization is threatened with the greatest calamity in history! We, who boast that our unequaled science has substituted machines for every premeditated physical movement of Man, are about to be thrown upon our natural resources. No longer will it be possible for us to move around, feed, clothe and warm ourselves by the use of intricate machinery. We shall have to use neglected, atrophied muscles. Yes, we shall have to learn to walk—for in six months time, every dynamo, every wheel will come to a sudden stop, perhaps forever!"

Bert's instinct for news, inbred in the Historian Family for centuries, overcame his astonishment. "But, venerable sir. Has this danger come

about suddenly? Was there no warning?"

Jon grunted in disgust. "Certainly. Ever since the Twenty-Ninth Century, when individual families seized control of the separate industries of the world, the danger was known. Even then, coal, petroleum, and other common forms of carbon had been criminally wasted by improper combustion until great efforts to locate hidden coal mines and oil deposits were necessitated. For the past five hundred years, we have been forced to reclaim every bit of carbon contained in the earth's atmosphere, until the supply has been almost exhausted. Even my new process of carbon-fixation is not in itself sufficient!"

Bert reflected for a moment, and then peering directly into his visitor's sharp eyes, he asked: "Venerable sir, why do you come to me?"

For the first time, Jon lost his air of arrogance. "The Supreme Council," he began in a more subdued manner, "is convinced that you are the only man on Earth that can help us!"

"But I am no scientist," objected the Historian. "I know nothing about fuels or machinery. If it were not for the automatic controls of my space-monotrol, I could not even fly!"

Jon nodded sadly. "Yes," he agreed, "but of all the world's teeming millions, you alone may be able to obtain for us the secret of interatomic energy."

IMMEDIATELY, a light of understanding began to filter into Bert's brain. "Y-you mean she might give it to me?"

The look of eagerness in Jon's old eyes quieted the growing anger in Bert's breast.

"Jones-Bert," began the Governor, his voice ringing soberly. "When the

Incomparable Lia, Mistress of the Heliites of the Moon, Preceptor of the Planets of the Solar System, visited us last year, you alone, found favor in her eyes. It was you she chose to accompany her on her voyage of inspection of Earth. Your superiors are convinced that only her friendship for you induced her to aid us with our scientific problems. Have you not made several visits to her palace in the interior of the Moon? We know that frequently messages come for you at our interstellar broadcast station in Neonla."

The pronouncing of Lia's name brought a wave of emotion into Bert's heart. Though of a different race, Lia's friendship meant more to him than any honor the Supreme Council could confer.

He shook his head slowly. "Venerable sir, it is impossible."

"Why?"

"For two reasons. First, it is against the Interstellar Code to visit the Moon, uninvited or unsummoned. Secondly, the only reason Lia and her Heliites hold control of the System is because of their knowledge of the secret of the atom. Why should she surrender it to me?"

Jon's shiny features grew red with anger. "Wretch!" he screamed. "Would you see your brothers groveling on the ground, vainly attempting to stand on their shrunken legs? Would you have your fellow-men die of starvation and cold?"

The Historian stopped him. "Very well," he sighed, "I'll leave for the Moon immediately, but I warn you—uninvited visitors to the Moon are always disintegrated long before they reach its atmosphereless surface—"

The hum of the telecaster interrupted him. Bert nodded an apology and slid to the panel. The screen cleared and the bored features of

White-Lem of the local Communications-Council, appeared.

"Jones-Bert," he drawled, "we have just recorded a message from the Moon. Listen: 'To Men of Earth. I, Lia of the Heliites, by the power in me vested, do order you to send a representative to the Fifth All-Solar Congress, to be held at the Interstellar Chamber of our city. Your delegate is to leave at once! Jones-Bert, Historian, will be suitable to my desire.'"

Jon's face wrinkled in a rare smile. "Just what I've prayed for! An invitation to the Moon! Prepare to leave at once, my son!"

BERT subdued a thrill of anticipation as he spied the tiny, penetrating guide-ray darting from the lifeless surface of the Moon. "H'mm," he grunted. "So I'm to descend by the crater of Mount Macrobios!"

He slowed his space-monotrol and aimed it directly at the yawning mouth of the extinct volcano. Other than the single radiation, the pit-marked contour of the Moon was devoid of any movement.

As he sank below the chalky rim of the crater, the Historian set his landing apparatus for twenty thousand Earth feet, the exact depth of his necessary descent. In a moment, he felt the light shock that announced the end of his month's journey into space. He was ready to enter the vast subterranean galleries of the Moon!

A loud hissing told Jones-Bert that he was in the outer atmospheric lock. He turned off his cabin-light and attempted to penetrate the Stygian blackness around him, but was unsuccessful. He started nervously on hearing the familiar, vibrant voice

of Lia, Chieftainess of the arrogant Heliites:

"Greetings, Earthling," rang her pompous tones from the telecastor. "You must be weary; I shall give you audience immediately."

Bert stammered some reply. As ever, he experienced the same feelings of inferiority and humility that her presence caused.

Several attendants opened the sealed cabin door. But for the strangeness of their limbs, the Heliites might have been fellow-Earthmen, so closely did they resemble Bert's own people. Their heads, while not as bulging or bald, were shaped like his. Their features were earthly, but oddly distorted; and there the resemblance ceased!

While the Earthman's legs were shriveled, due to centuries of disuse, those of the Heliites were sinewy and well-developed. Both arms and legs were, in length, weirdly out of proportion to their torsos, and a heavy growth of hair covered their entire bodies.

And, while the Earthman was helpless to move about without the intricate motor-carriage that bore him everywhere, the Heliites were agile and spry and used their feet and toes with the same dexterity as their hands and fingers. Despite their obvious dissimilarity, Bert felt a common bond between them.

Perhaps it was because of all the peoples of the Solar System, only the Earthmen and the Heliites were equipped with vocal organs and had the faculty of speech. Communication with the others was only by mental-telepathy and thought-transference. Surely, few of the other planets boasted of beings even distantly resembling Man. All admitted openly that their science fell far short of the deep, profound knowl-

edge of the Heliites. And why not?

Where else in the System could be found so perfect an existence as here, deep in the center of the Moon, where for ages the Heliites had kept their presence secret from the other inhabitants of the Solar System, until they were ready to emerge and further the civilization of the planets with their infinite wisdom? Hadn't they succeeded in releasing the limitless energy of the atom? Wasn't their dwelling-place perfect in its independence of weather conditions, with its artificial atmosphere and countless luxuries? Truly, the center of erudition and learning was here in Helia!

THE Earthman noticed that great preparations had been made for the coming convention. All about him were signs of considerable activity.

Bert looked up awkwardly at the tall Heliites who towered above him. Though they had their own spoken language, the universal use of thought-transference had made learning the earthly tongue, Esperanto, very simple. He addressed a native who seemed to be his escort's leader: "Is your Chieftainess, the glorious Lia, in good health?"

The Heliite smiled condescendingly. "Yes, Earthman, we in Helia need not the clumsy 'weather-hoods' that the debilitated humans wear."

He proudly bunched the muscles of his arms and legs. Bert thought it best to remain silent. He quietly admitted how true this was. Ages back, Man had traded his heritage of a powerful physique for mechanization. Here in the Moon, the Heliites had been wiser. Athletics was part of the national training for all.

At the entrance of a beautifully built edifice, they halted. Bert recog-

nized it for Lia's own quarters. With little delay, he was admitted; and as he guided his motor-carriage over the smooth floors he summoned all his courage for the coming audience.

LIA THE HELIITE

THE sight of the radiant Lia made him speechless. In a moment he saw that she had changed. She wore the customary cloak of spun gold that barely covered her long, hairy limbs. Her green flashing eyes pierced into his, causing his heart to beat with a rapidity that brought a flush to his carefully plucked cheeks.

"Jones-Bert," she purred softly. "I bid a member of the eminent Historian-Council of Earth, welcome. By my command, great honors are to be shown the representative of Earth. Never, in the five thousand years of your so-called enlightened era, has Man been so glorified."

Bert stirred uneasily. He wondered what devilry the mistress of all Helia had in store for him.

"Awesome Lia," he began. "Earth sends you her best wishes. We still remember your visit. Your astute wisdom will never be forgotten. As always, we are at your command!"

Lia's angular features lit up with satisfied pride. "The details of the honors in store for you shall be explained when I assemble the Congress, one Earth-week from today. If—" She broke off suddenly, a curious expression in her eyes.

Bert made a desperate attempt to screen his thoughts, but was too late. He turned away, as Lia burst forth into a throaty laugh.

"Do I read your mind correctly, Earth-man? What nonsense is this?" Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Your brain contained something besides your interest in the Solar Congress. Is there some trouble on Earth?"

Knowing full well that Lia had received his every thought-impulse, Bert threw all caution to the winds and stated bluntly: "Glorious Lia, Earth needs your secret of interatomic power. Without it we perish; we have consumed every bit of available fuel for our mechanisms!"

Lia nodded grimly. "After the Congress, if you still desire to ask a favor of me, you may do so. Until then, I have assigned a guide who will display before your unappreciative eyes, more of our wonders."

With a careless wave of her hand, she dismissed him. As Bert rolled from her presence, a feeling of foreboding came over him. There seemed little chance for the success of his mission, and as for honors—a sixth sense bade him suspect them. His intuition was right!

After Bert had rested, his guide presented himself. The Earthman looked at the tall, lanky Heliite with some interest.

"I am Parth," the native replied to his unspoken question. "We are to be together until the opening of the Solar Council. Where would you have me conduct you?"

Bert shrugged his shoulders disinterestedly. "I know very little of your history. Have you some records of your past that I might study?"

"Of course!" Parth retorted angrily. "We have a Chamber of Relics. Did you think us so uncivilized as to have no interest in our origin?"

For the first time, Bert showed some enthusiasm. "If you will conduct me to this Chamber of Relics, I will be very grateful."

The Heliite muttered something under his breath and led the way.

The Earthman suddenly recalled an old acquaintance. "Tell me, Parth," he begged. "Will Zogh, of Mercury be present at the convention?"

"Aye, he will arrive via Mount Copernicus, with the delegates from Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto."

Bert began to regain his accustomed cheerfulness. Perhaps he would get another opportunity to engage in a mental conversation with the huge Mercurian.

They halted in front of a cubic building, squat and without windows. As usual, it was guardless. There were no criminals in Helia, and escape without official permission through the double atmospheric locks was impossible.

As Bert and his escort advanced, the heavy doors swung open silently. They entered and the Earthman became engrossed in the hundreds of exhibits.

At once, his active eyes fell upon a shining object well to the rear of the great chamber. He wheeled closer, every sense eagerly concentrated upon this intriguing relic.

Parth laughed. "I knew you would be attracted to the 'Infinite Eye.' It is the most ancient and most sacred of our relics."

"May I examine it?"

"Yes, but be careful. Our scientists tell us that if dropped, it may shatter into a thousand pieces!"

Gingerly, Bert took the precious object in his hand. Unless his astounded eyes deceived him, here was the largest diamond he had ever seen! Its unusual size at first argued that it could not be a genuine gem, as it was almost a foot in diameter! Beautifully polished, its

hundreds of glittering facets dazzled the eyes of the Earthman.

Immediately, the germ of an amazing suspicion began to develop in Bert's brain. He swung to his guide.

"What is the history of the 'Infinite Eye'?"

Parth grimaced. "Save that our annals record its presence for countless ages, our scientists know nothing about it. Eons ago, my lesser-informed ancestors worshipped it. Evidently it was here when the first Heliites reached the Moon."

Bert reflected for a moment. He was well aware of the legend of the origin of the Heliites. They claimed that they were the descendants of beings who had dwelt in the Sun, and when that heavenly body had become incandescent, they had been forced to seek a cooler planet or be destroyed by the growing heat. The Earth's scientists had discreetly smiled at the boastful tale, but had dared to say nothing.

Parth sat down on the smooth pavement and fondly passed the huge diamond from one foot to the other, stroking it lovingly with his agile toes.

"I'll wager, Earthman," he remarked proudly, "that you have nothing as beautiful on your planet."

BERT could not tear his eyes from the scintillating gem. He took it from the Heliite and attempted to see into its interior, but like a complex arrangement of mirrors, it but reflected his own image.

Then the surprising suspicion took full form. This object was a diamond. A diamond was principally crystallized carbon, and there was no carbon on the moon!

His Heliite guide stood patiently watching, every thought of the

Earthman as clear to him as if Bert had spoken aloud.

"Ah, Historian," he exclaimed. "You seem to have made an important discovery! If you will promise not to leave the building without signalling the Visitors' Bureau, I shall leave you to your studies for as long as you like."

Bert smiled his thanks and Parth departed.

When he was alone, the Earthman adjusted his spectacles to their greatest magnification. Carefully, he examined the "Eye." He almost dropped it in surprise upon noticing an almost invisible line across its center. The relic was composed of two diamonds, not one! Without doubt, the gem should divide into two parts!

Thanking his stars that Time had not taken Man's muscular fingers as it had his power to walk, Bert set about attempting to open the "Eye."

It was three hours later before he discovered that the parts of the relic had been screwed together, and the joint began to yield.

Trembling with anticipation, the Historian slowly unscrewed the gem and carefully deposited the upper half on the floor. In its hollow interior was a tight, compact roll of the thinnest platinum sheets!

With shaking fingers, Bert removed the outer leaf and eagerly scanned the familiar Heliite hieroglyphics. Only in the slightest measure did the ancient writings differ from the modern Heliite written language.

"The Travels of Kwid the Heliite, for the eyes of any future generation, whose wisdom should bring these writings to light," he read.

Pangs of hunger caused Bert to halt his labors and reach for a food-lozenge. He noted with satisfaction

that his supply would last for days. As for drinking water, there was plenty at hand.

Excitedly, the Earthman resumed his reading. Perhaps he would find the secret of inter-atomic energy? Perhaps the mystery of Creation would be explained!

When Parth called to take him to the Congress, almost a week later, Bert was engaged in resetting the "Eye" upon its pedestal—in appearance as complete as before. Actually, the relic was empty.

Bert had not labored for days in vain. He had not discovered the secret of atomic energy, but he had brought to light something more astounding. He now knew more of the so-called "Heliites" than did the superior race itself!

THE interstellar chamber was indeed a wonder of beauty. It had been hewn from a solid, coral-rock mass, created by some ancient hypogenic action in the interior of the Moon. Its pink walls reflected the cold, selenium lights in a dazzling rainbow of many hues.

No less impressive was its nine large booths, symbolical of the nine major planets of the Solar System. Two of them had been made quite large to contain the enormous bodies of Zogh of Mercury and Kri of Pluto. The others narrowed down to the tiny orifice of Xing'tadi of Mars, blind and without ears.

A grotesque, long-legged Heliite entered the room with huge strides. He placed his long-armed hands across his eyes and swept them forward in an all-embracing salute. Jones-Bert could feel the mental impulses enter his brain. The Solar representatives were being officially welcomed!

None moved until Lia, closely en-

veloped in her golden robe, strode majestically to her seat on the rostrum. She too covered her eyes and flashed a message of greeting to her guests. Immediately, Bert felt his fellow-Solarites respond. His brain recorded their individual, respectful acknowledgements.

It was a weird sight. All but the delegate from Mars had eyes or their equivalent. Xing'tadi's thick, long antennae never ceased their anxious wig-wagging during the entire session. They served him for ears and eyes.

After a short prayer for Divine approval, Lia formally opened the meeting. Her keen mind unhesitatingly sent forth its message to the receptive brains of her entranced audience:

"Respected Beings of the Solar System!" she flashed. "By my command this, our Fifth Solar Congress, is hereby dedicated to Earth!"

Bert sensed the puzzled thoughts of his colleagues. He glanced at the cubic body of his friend, Zogh the Mercurian, as if for information. The huge torso twitched and quivered as its red, fiery eyes burned across the room into his.

"Earthman," they chided. "Forget not that your planet is fifth in size. Before your admittance to our Congress, the mighty Lia dedicated each of these sessions to a single world, commencing with Jupiter, the largest."

Bert sent his thanks and turned his eyes worshipfully toward Lia. She was continuing:

"Jones-Bert, Earth's representative, most famous of its Historians, is here with us. Let him give heed to what shall be displayed before us. Perhaps he can learn something, wise though he be.

"I am about to review briefly the

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FUTURE FICTION

ethnological history of the evolution of Man upon the planet Earth. If any of you so desire, interrupt and I shall explain what you may not readily understand."

Lia swung her oddly long arms and clapped her hands. Instantly two attendants appeared. The Chieftainess lifted one downy leg and extended a curiously wrought key between two of her toes.

With a bow, a native took it and left the room. For a moment, all was silent, then a chorus of puzzled vibrations emanated from the delegates.

Lia wriggled into a more comfortable position and sent forth an impulse for attention.

"Respected Beings, ever since my reverent ancestors, the original Helites, were forced to leave their beloved Sun—when, in the beginning of time, it became incandescent—the planet called Earth was foremost in their mighty minds—possibly, because their infinite wisdom divined that ages later, beings would appear that in some ways would resemble themselves.

"In any case, by the aid of their perfect science, many voyages were made to its surface. The reason why they chose its satellite, the Moon for their final habitat has been lost in the dim past.

"From time to time, they visited the young planet, patiently awaiting the appearance of intelligent beings. Over a period of 700,000 years, our scouts collected a group of specimens, beginning with what the Earth Historians called the Piltdown Man, or the Eanthropus Dawsoni, with high foreheads, ape-like lower jaws, and tiny brains. On their next visit 100,000 years later, my ancestors believed that Man must have greatly developed. The next type they

THE INFINITE EYE

found was the Peking Man. Beyond an increase in size and a slight enlargement of the brain pan, there was very little improvement.

"In 100,000 years, man had hardly improved at all. Only by popular demand did our scientists make another voyage 50,000 years later. This time some progress had been made, at least physically—for the next Sub-Man really showed physical improvement. Pithecanthropus Erectus, almost twice the size of the Peking Man, with its bull-shaped head, huge teeth and thin lipless mouth, actually attacked our explorers. His slightly larger brain contained nothing but bestial desires of feeding, mating and killing!"

The Heliote Chieftainess's face flushed with disgust as she continued. "Two things influenced the great delay that occurred until our next visit to Earth: realization that more time must be given for any real improvement, and the coming of the second Glacial Age. So it was that not until 300,000 years later, Heliote Space-Ships landed again on Terra-Firma. My ancestors next found the Homo Heidelbergensis, a type with only one redeeming feature. He had some interest in community life—but he too was unimportant."

The Solar Delegates quickly sensed the rising anger in Bert's mind at Lia's belittling attitude, and a number of different impressions came to him. Of all the strange creatures, only Zogh, the Mercurian, sympathized with his discomfort and mentally urged patience.

Disappointed at Bert's refusal to rise to her slightly concealed derision Lia went on: "Fifty thousand years ago, the Third Ice Age had come and gone, and the Fourth Glacial Period was well at its height, when we again sought earthly shores. The Earth

(Continued on Page 104)

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THE INFINITE EYE

scouts took back with them what they considered the planet's most intelligent type, an Egyptian. Mysterious sciences were at his command; by vocation he was a priest. We even discovered the man's name, Khona, Master of the Third Temple of Thoth.

"It is truly a shame that his civilization was destroyed by barbaric, savage invaders. Had his race been permitted to flourish, my task today might be a more pleasant one!"

Bert recoiled from the ominous threat in her voice. Now he knew that something disagreeable was about to happen. But even his keen mind could not picture the surprise in store!

THE SECRET OF THE EYE

AT A signal from Lia, attendants wheeled in several cages containing each of the specimens the Chieftainess had described—alive!

Though the earliest sub-man was easily over 700,000 years old, it and its fellows were throbbing with life! Lia's brain radiated that they had been kept alive in vaults, through the ages, by suspended animation.

A gasp of bewildered amazement burst from Bert's lips. He knew that he was not alone in his surprise. Eagerly, he scanned the different types of sub-men. On Earth, the Historians had frequently attempted many reconstructions of the fossil skeletons in their museums, but their results had fallen far short of these living specimens. They were of all sizes. Hairy, brute faces peered at the audience with various grades of intelligence. Several slunk back into the far corners of their cages in fear. Others defiantly roared incoherent threats, and beat their huge paw-like hands against the bars.

(Continued on Page 106)

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106

FUTURE FICTION

(Continued from Page 105)

Loud growls drew Bert's attention to a powerful Heidelberg Man, who was thundering challenges through his slaving lips and causing his cage to creak with his herculean blows at its supports. Then it happened!

Before their startled eyes, the huge brute smashed the restraining bars with a mighty heave of his gigantic shoulders and sprang forward, his gnarled fingers extended hungrily for Lia's soft throat!

For the first time in their acquaintance, Bert saw Lia radiate fear. In the split-second that it took for the ape-man to reach the foot of her rostrum, he acted.

With one swift, sweeping movement, the Earthman produced his beam-projector and, aiming it at the leaping creature, pressed its trigger to the primary paralysis notch. Arrested in mid-air, the sub-man collapsed to the ground!

Bert's narrow chest began to swell with satisfaction, when the cold realization of what he had done seeped into his numbed brain. Though, beyond a doubt, he had saved Lia from death, he had committed the unpardonable crime of carrying a lethal weapon into the Assembly Chamber!

"Ignoramus!" she hissed hotly. "You have violated one of the most important articles in the Interplanetary Code! For this infraction of the rules, you are subject to harsh penalties—"

Bert spluttered an apology, but Lia stopped him. "Imbecilic human!" she blistered. "Later, you will suffer for this insult! Now, I must continue."

By now, attendants had secured the dazed sub-man, and Lia went on: "The 7,000 years that passed before we visited Earth again, was a constant panorama of barbaric, incomprehensible warfare. Every genera-

THE INFINITE EYE

tion was decimated by the greatest show of savage, senseless killing, that should be an impressive example to every race in the Solar System.

"No sooner did a nation settle down to a period of culture and advancement than a less intelligent neighbor would swarm down upon it and cut short its march of intellect. Envy, greed, and lust ruled everywhere!"

She fearlessly left the rostrum and brushed past the caged beasts until she reached a specimen at the end of the line of cages.

"Behold," she cried, "the man of 1945 A. D.!"

Bert smiled grimly. It was just as he had expected—an ancient American criminal type, blinking his small eyes furtively in fear and astonishment at the strange sight.

"Imagine, my colleagues!" ranted Lia. "In this age, Man had succeeded in partially conquering the air, yet read the brain of this specimen. See the mark of the killer on his flat features! Lust, rape, greed are the least of his vices! With this low example, I conclude my review of the Ancestry of Man!"

Lia faced her audience impressively, and with great concentration sent the following astounding message: "You have seen and heard all. As ever, I have had an important reason for summoning you to this Congress. On this occasion, you are to judge whether Man of Earth is worthy to be numbered among us! My own positive opinion is that he should rank with the base, brutal and barbarous sub-animals such as roam the marshes of the ten satellites of Saturn!

"See Jones-Bert, the perfect Earthman! Note his shrivelled, useless legs, a sure sign of criminal disregard of the blessings of nature! I

(Continued on Page 108)

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FUTURE FICTION

(Continued from Page 107)

am very thankful that, though in many ways my people resemble the Earthmen, there is not the slightest possibility of any ethnological relationship! Consider quickly; we are about to vote on my motion that Man of Earth be expelled from the Society of Planets!"

A RED haze materialized before Bert's grief-stricken eyes. His own personal feelings of despair and humiliation were submerged in the wave of resentment of Lia's insidious attack upon his people.

In a desperate last attempt to save his fellow-Earthmen, Bert sent a plea for a hearing. Grudgingly, Lia nodded her assent. The delegates eagerly awaited his reply.

"Great Chieftainess," Bert began feverishly, "your review of Man's evolution on Earth has been woefully inadequate. Unhappily for us, your ancestors had neither the time nor the patience to carefully seek out the personages whom our history proves were worthy of esteem!"

Lia's face flushed with anger. "Earthling!" she roared. "How dare you hint that my ancestors were negligent in their researches? They spent eons upon eons in their study of Earth and Man. There is no question as to their findings. Consider carefully, before you add further insult to the disrespect you have shown!"

But Bert was insistent: "Respected Lia, I am prepared to prove all my assertions. How do you explain these important questions?"

"Can you account for the physical resemblance of the Piltdown Man to the apes and their descendants? Have you any theories as to the correct idea of a common ancestor of these two types?"

"Our poor science definitely proves

THE INFINITE EYE

that at least four million years ago, this Missing Link in your chain—half-ape and half-monkey—clambered about on trees and ran equally well on its hind legs. Biological science compels us to believe that such a creature really existed and was the common ancestor of anthropoid apes and the two specimens of Man, Homo Sapiens and Homo Primigensis. We are convinced that these creatures lived in the Eocene Era. If your ancient science is so perfect and without flaw, explain what happened to this missing tribe of First Men, and by this proof of your infinite judgment, we of the Solar System will abide by your decision!"

Flashes of doubt from the delegates came to Bert's mind. He was sure that their confidence in Lia was shaken.

Off her guard, Lia allowed her mental uncertainty to be read by all. With an effort for control, she arrogantly replied:

"Inferior Earthling! You rant of your science. How can you compare your poor store of knowledge with ours? What proof have you that these First Men did exist?"

Smiling triumphantly, Bert produced the heavy roll of platinum sheets which he had removed from the "Eye." No longer did he address his words to Lia alone.

"Respected Beings of the Solar System," he sent, "each of you is acquainted with the 'Infinite Eye,' most prized of the relics of Helia! For countless generations it has been the marvel of the Heliites who had lost the secret of its origin. Left alone in the Chamber of Relics, I was successful in opening it and here is what the ancient relic concealed!" He held up the platinum roll.

From all sides of the Council Chamber, attendants began to close

(Continued on Page 110)

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FUTURE FICTION

(Continued from Page 109)

in on the Earthman. A battery of silent demands from the delegates caused Lia to halt her guards.

"Let the madman be heard!" she snapped angrily.

Bert bobbed his thanks. "I shall read the inscription on the wrapper: 'The Travels of Kwid the Heliite, for the eyes of any future generation whose wisdom should bring these writings to light!'"

Jones-Bert's anger at his unfair treatment caused him to lose his great fear of the powerful Lia. He faced the delegates and mentally sent a message that seared its way through the entire assemblage. Under its scorn, Lia writhed as if her shapely body were beneath the lash.

"Beings of the Solar System! More especially Lia, of the so-called Heliites—vain, egotistic wretches!—who in their stiff-necked ignorance call themselves 'People of the Sun'—listen and hear the true story of your origin and that of Man!"

"The real Heliites, who once had physical bodies as ugly and as comely as your own, but whose brains will never again be equalled—realizing that unless radical steps were taken to preserve their infinite knowledge, it would be lost to the Universe forever—set about to find young, undeveloped and impressionable minds, to be trained as their mental heirs.

"The record secreted by the 'Eye' relates the travels of a space-squadron admiral, one Kwid. Insofar as your legend mentions that the Heliites were driven from their original home in the Sun by the growing heat, it is true. However, they arrived at the young planet, Earth, in the Eocene Age, almost four million Earth-years ago.

"The Heliite ethnologists captured several Tarsoids—so called on ac-

THE INFINITE EYE

count of their disproportionately long legs and arms—and rightfully decided that these were the common ancestors of the Dryopithecii. Impressed with their intelligence, the travelers rounded up all of the tribes that they could find in a great attempt to save them from destruction. To transport them to the nearest planet was impracticable. The aborigines would never have lived through the journey.

"The nearest safe location was Earth's satellite, the Moon. Newly broken from the Earth, it was but 238,000 Earth-miles distant—a voyage of but a few hours. On account of its atmosphereless surface, it was necessary to hollow out vast, air-filled galleries in its center, by the means of inter-atomic energy. Then followed age after age of mental training for the Tarsioids. Soon came malleable intelligence. Much of the Heliites' wisdom was implanted in their fertile brains, and not a century too soon!

"For a thousand years, the Heliites' physical constitutions had been on the wane. Hunger had disappeared together with the other desires of the flesh and they had become faint shadows, totally invisible save in the strong light of their parent, the Sun.

"Assured that the Tarsioids needed them no longer, the Heliites faded from their midst, leaving as their last instructions that they observe the development of Man upon Earth.

"The true record of their origin Kwid inscribed upon these sheets of platinum and hid inside of a huge diamond, which he had transported from the young planet, Earth. Freed from all physical ties, they entered into that ethereal existence—in limitless space—outside the bounds of time, there to pursue their studies

(Continued on Page 112)



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FUTURE FICTION

(Continued from Page 111)

in various worlds and dimensions.

"This is the true story of the Heliites and their children who have taken the glories of their preceptors unto themselves. Forgetting their earthly origin, they now belittle their own kinsmen; Men of Earth!"

BERT shrank back, exhausted. Murmurs of agreement came to his brain. The Solar delegates were comparing the resemblances of the Earthman and Lia. The Earthman knew that he had won the debate, but had he lost Lia's friendship?

Impressed with the proceedings, the proceedings, the delegates bade their hostess farewell and left for their homes.

Jones-Bert was alone with Lia in her audience-chamber. He had been stopped at the inner lock, while attempting to leave for the Earth. He had been escorted to the Chieftainess' chambers.

His eyes were fixed upon her face in adoration. Several times he attempted to speak, but something in her dazzling eyes restrained him.

At once he tensed in surprise. Never before had a Heliite allowed his mind to be read by a stranger. Now, Lia's thoughts were as clear as if she were speaking.

Bert rolled very close to her and she extended a long, bronze-haired leg and caressed him with her toes. Joy encompassed the Earthman as her thoughts came to him:

"Kinsman of Earth, your mind has frequently told me of your love. It is returned. As on Earth, you have wooed me with a diamond—'The Infinite Eye.' My dowry to you and the People of Earth, shall be the secret of atomic energy.

"Together, let us commence the reunion of Earth's too long separated races!"

Another scan
by
cape1736

